

## “Then He Appeared...”

Acts 10:34-43; Mark 16:1-8

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We came with the crowds, on the day when Jesus triumphantly entered Jerusalem. We came with the disciples, to celebrate the Passover meal, in an upper room. We came to the garden where Jesus was betrayed and arrested. We came to the house of the high priest, where Jesus was questioned and bound. We came to the headquarters of Pontius Pilate, where Jesus was interrogated and flogged. We came to the Stone Pavement, where Jesus was condemned. We came to a place just outside Jerusalem called Golgotha, “the Place of the Skull,” where Jesus was crucified and died. We came.

We came with the women, who stood weeping at the foot of the cross. We came with Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, who took the body of Jesus, wrapped it, and laid it in a tomb. We came.

Then we went home, and we wept. A day passed. A long, sad day. We grieved and mourned.

The next morning, the women come to the tomb. They are struck with wonder and awe. We have different versions of the story in the New Testament. All of them say that something miraculous happened. A miracle, in *real* time, in the *real* world, in the here-and-now of Roman-occupied Jerusalem nearly two thousand years ago. Jesus was *alive*! That’s the testimony of those first Christians, long ago.

But how do we know it to be *true*?

Last fall I started reading the massive *History of the Christian Church* by the nineteenth-century scholar Philip Schaff. This is an enormous work, eight volumes covering sixteen centuries, each volume about 600 pages long, each page densely packed with detail. It’s going to take me quite a while to get through it! You might think that a book more than a century old might be somewhat dated by now, but honestly it feels remarkably fresh. The things historians disagree about really haven’t changed much in that length of time. We’ve made some significant discoveries since then – like the Dead Sea Scrolls, to give just one example – but on the whole Schaff’s work stands the test of time, and honestly I find it to be a lot deeper and richer than many books that get published today. Schaff was *incredibly* thorough. When he talks about the events that gave birth to the church, he offers one of the most comprehensive discussions about the resurrection I’ve ever seen – and the question of whether it actually *happened*.

Schaff writes: “The resurrection of Christ from the dead is reported by the four Gospels, taught in the Epistles, believed throughout Christendom, and celebrated on every ‘Lord’s Day,’ as an historical fact, as the crowning miracle and divine seal of his whole work, as the foundation of the hopes of believers, as the pledge of their own future resurrection.... Without this fact the church could never have been born, or if born, it would soon have died a natural death. The miracle of the resurrection and the existence of Christianity are so closely connected that they must stand or fall together. If Christ was

raised from the dead, ... our faith is impregnable; if he was not raised, he died in vain and our faith is vain.... The resurrection of Christ ... is either the greatest miracle or the greatest delusion which history records." Schaff notes that Christ's followers behaved remarkably differently after the resurrection than they were before. "For two days they were trembling on the brink of despair. But on the third day, behold, the same disciples underwent a complete revolution from despondency to hope, from timidity to courage, from doubt to faith, and began to proclaim the gospel of the resurrection in the face of an unbelieving world and at the peril of their lives.... It reached even the leader of the persecution, Saul of Tarsus, one of the clearest and strongest intellects, and converted him into the most devoted and faithful champion of this very gospel to the hour of his martyrdom. This is a fact," Schaff says, "patent to every reader of the closing chapters of the Gospels, and is freely admitted even by the most advanced skeptics. The question now rises whether this inner revolution in the life of the disciples, with its incalculable effects upon the fortunes of mankind, can be rationally explained...; in other words, whether the professed faith of the disciples in the risen Christ was true and real, or a hypocritical lie, or an honest self-delusion." Schaff says that "there are four possible theories which have been tried again and again, and defended with as much learning and ingenuity as can be summoned to their aid."

(1) First is the traditional Christian view, "presented by the Gospels and believed in the Christian church of every denomination and sect. The resurrection of Christ was an actual though miraculous event, in harmony with his previous history and character, and in fulfilment of his own prediction. It was a re-animation of the dead body of Jesus by a return of his soul from the spirit-world, and a rising of body and soul from the grave to a new life, which after repeated manifestations to believers during a short period of forty days entered into glory by the ascension to heaven." This is, of course, the view presented in various writings contained in the New Testament. But it is not without difficulties. "Truth compels us to admit," says Schaff, "that there are serious difficulties in harmonizing the accounts of the evangelists" – starting with the question of *how many women went to the tomb on Easter morning*, which the gospels do not agree on. Schaff also admits that there are difficulties "in forming a consistent conception of the nature of Christ's resurrection-body," as the body of the risen Christ is described in different ways. But even with these difficulties, the New Testament writers present a reasonably similar picture, a picture that includes a "sudden, radical, and permanent change in the mind and conduct of the disciples.... They showed the strength and boldness of their conviction by soon returning to Jerusalem, the post of danger, and founding there, in the very face of the hostile Sanhedrin, the mother-church of Christendom." Any competing theory has to be able to explain why the disciples *changed*.

(2) The first alternate theory is what Schaff calls "the Theory of Fraud": "the apostles stole and hid the body of Jesus, and deceived the world." This theory has been around since the days of the early church. The first problem with this theory is that Matthew says there were Roman soldiers *guarding the tomb*. (Matthew 27:62-66; 28:11-15) The notion that the apostles could have outfoxed Roman soldiers is laughable. But the bigger problem with this theory is that if the apostles had fabricated an incredible lie, what would have compelled them to proclaim and defend it in the face of the terrible persecutions that followed? Almost all of them eventually ended up dead at the hands of the Romans. If they had made it up, surely at least *one* of them would have eventually admitted it. But none of them ever did.

(3) Then there is what Schaff calls "the Swoon-Theory." In this theory, Jesus didn't really die. It just *looked* like he was dead. His life "was restored by the tender care of his friends and disciples...; and after a brief period he quietly died a natural death." From a medical perspective, this theory would have to account for how a crucified man could have survived the lashings and loss of blood. This theory also

does not explain the tremendous *enthusiasm* and *hope* that is so evident in the early church. If Jesus' life had merely been *prolonged* a little while, then what would have given the apostles such great *joy*?

(4) Finally, there is what Schaff calls "the Vision-Theory." According to this theory, "Christ rose merely in the imagination of his friends, who mistook a subjective vision or dream for actual reality." In this theory, "the resurrection does not belong to the history of Christ at all, but to the inner life of his disciples." This theory, like the previous two, has some flaws. First, *what happened to Jesus' body*? Was it still in the tomb? For if people were saying that they had seen Jesus appear, the Jewish or Roman authorities could have simply ordered the tomb opened, and *there would have been his body* – hard, physical proof that he was really dead. Second, what would have compelled the women and the apostles to share their visions so broadly with the world? Most of us don't go around telling random strangers the crazy things we dream about! Third, why would all of these vision experiences suddenly stop forty days later? None of the original apostles, women, or other disciples report seeing Jesus on earth beyond that forty-day mark. There were *many* reported appearances ... and then, suddenly, *none*. And fourth, how is it possible that "many persons, singly and collectively, at different times, and in different places, from Jerusalem to Damascus, had the same vision and dreamed the same dream ... and that they were by this baseless vision raised all at once from the deepest gloom in which the crucifixion of their Lord had left them, to the boldest faith and strongest hope which impelled them to proclaim the gospel of the resurrection from Jerusalem to Rome to the end of their lives!" The idea that all these different people experienced the same dream or vision is interesting – but some big questions remain.

Schaff explores these theories in detail, with copious quotations from other historians – English, French, and German. He was remarkably well-read! He does not shy away from the arguments made by scholars who vehemently rejected the resurrection; he gives them all a fair hearing. But none of those competing arguments are persuasive to him. In the end, he is left with only two possibilities: "We must either admit the miracle, or frankly confess that we stand here before an inexplicable mystery." That is – either Jesus *really did rise from the dead* – or something else happened that completely defies all reason and logic. For it is impossible to explain the change in the attitudes and behavior on the part of the disciples unless something *incredibly compelling* had lifted them out of their despair, and filled them with renewed hope and a passionate intensity, courage, and boldness that they had not had before. Christianity went from being a small band of unorganized and discouraged mourners the day after Christ's death to an incredibly energetic and effective evangelistic effort that spread with remarkable speed to all parts of the Roman Empire, even in the face of tremendous opposition and, at times, outright hostility and violent persecution. Somehow, those who doubt the resurrection have to be able to account for that historical reality. What gave the apostles such incredible *passion* and *energy* and *drive*? What made those common men – who had scattered to the winds when Jesus was arrested! – become so incredibly unafraid of persecution and death, so willing to *risk their lives* to convey a certain message to the world? How could any of this have happened, if there had not been some *incredibly compelling* event behind it all, something that *fundamentally altered* their whole approach to life?

We are left, then, with a choice. We could take our stance with the skeptics – knowing full well that each of the skeptical arguments has its own set of problems, issues, and unresolved questions. Or we could accept the possibility that what the Christian church has been teaching for nearly two thousand years now is actually true: that Christ is risen ... *Christ is risen* ... Christ is risen *indeed!*

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