

4-1985

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Recommended Citation

Towns, Elmer L., "He is Risen as He Said" (1985). *Articles*. Paper 5.
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He is Risen ... as He said



by Elmer L. Towns

Many sculptors and painters have portrayed Christ on the cross, but the catalyst of Christianity is the empty cross and the empty tomb. "He is not here," said the angel. "He is risen, as He said."

Since the Resurrection is the fundamental truth of Christianity (1 Cor. 15:14), if critics can raise questions or disprove its veracity, they will have successfully crippled the faith in general and destroyed individual faith in particular. The main onslaught is centered in the question, "Is the account of the Resurrection an accurate historical record of what really happened?"

The science of historical research is an attempt to gather, analyze, arrange, and interpret facts from the past. When this is done the researcher arrives at historical objectivity. Yet, in *Kerygma and Myth* Rudolf Bultmann denied the Resurrection by stating, "A historical fact which involves a resurrection from the dead is utterly inconceivable."

Critics offer many theories in an attempt to deny the Resurrection. Some say the disciples stole the body. This view persisted in New Testament times. Matthew records that the priest bribed the guards to spread the tale, "His disciples came by night, and stole him away while we slept" (Matt. 28:13). In answer to this charge, Origen, an early church father, declares that men do not risk their lives for a lie (Acts 7:59-60; 12:2). R. M. Reimarus in his 1778 *The God of Jesus and His Disciples*, said the disciples stole His body and said He would soon return as the people's Messiah.

The Swoon theory, suggested in 1828 by Paulus, a German, claims that because of the short time on the cross,

Jesus was taken down in a death-like swoon (perceived as death by the soldier). The cool grave revived Him, the earthquake rolled the stone away, and He stripped off His grave clothes and left them in the tomb. Dressed in a gardener's clothes (why Mary mistook Him), He went away to meet His disciples in the Upper Room.

In *The Passover Plot*, Hugh Schoufield presents a more sinister plan by implying that Jesus felt He was a prophet, studied the Old Testament, and realized He must suffer for the sins of Israel. He provoked the Jews and prodded Judas to betray Him. He knew the body would not be left on the cross over Passover, so He allowed Himself to be crucified. He had arranged for the code word "I thirst," to signal someone to give Him a knockout drug that made it appear He was dead. Joseph of Arimathea was part of the plot and rushed to Pilate to get the body, but unknown to them, Jesus' side was pierced and He died by mistake. Jesus had planned His fake Resurrection and told them to meet Him in Galilee. His body was mistakenly placed in the wrong tomb, leaving the original tomb empty. The women and disciples came to the previously designated tomb, but He was not there. A young man (perhaps a gardener) at the tomb told them, "He is not here" and pointed to the correct tomb and said "Go." They misunderstood and thought he said "Go tell." While this was a popular novel, and a different explanation of the Resurrection, its interpretations are not consistent with historical data.

Kirsopp Lake wrote *The Resurrection of Christ* in 1912, analyzing what he called "the facts behind the resur-

rection." He suggested there were several tombs in the area where Jesus was buried, so the women and disciples had gone to the wrong tomb.

Modern theology has produced several views that accept the reality of the Resurrection while denying its historical validity. As paradoxical as it may sound, they hold that the Resurrection was not supernatural in past history, but its spiritual nature transcends history; therefore the Resurrection is real whether or not it is history. This view is not subject to proof, nor do they seemingly care if it is verified.

In *The Theology of the Resurrection*, Walter Kunneth proposed, "The resurrection is clearly rooted in history although it is not in itself a historical fact." He suggests a dual level for interpreting history—what may be non-supernatural in this world is supernatural in another world. He states, "The reality of the resurrection of Jesus lies beyond our earthly categories." When we question where this non-earthly Resurrection took place, he says that the Resurrection is a "primal miracle beyond the bounds of the immanent world." In *Resurrection of Jesus Christ*, Reginald Fuller suggests, "It was not a 'historical' but an eschatological and meta-physical event occurring precisely at the point where history ends, but leaving its mark in history." Therefore, we find the latest attack on the Resurrection denies its "historicity" but affirms its reality.

Spawning from the modern theological approach of the Resurrection are three prominent naturalistic theories. The most favored is the Subjective Vision theory espoused by Rudolf Bultmann who states, "The historian

can perhaps to some extent account for that faith from the personal intimacy which the disciples enjoyed with Jesus during His earthly life, and so reduce the resurrection appearances to a series of subjective visions." George Hanson aptly describes this theory in his book *The Resurrection and the Life* by referring to the apostles and witnesses as "well-meaning, perfectly honest men, but fanatics and visionaries, carried away with the exuberance of their own fancy, and that their visions of their Master after His death were simply externalized pictures of an excited imagination and had no reality outside their own expectant and highly sensitive minds." But this view is riddled with difficulties. How could such visions arise to a fearful and scared band of men who did not understand or expect the Resurrection? Why was it that the subjective visions began on the third day and not on an earlier or later date?

Another theory is the Telegram or Objective theory. Rooted within this theory is the concept that Christ communicated with His disciples through mystical messages. In *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?* Alexander Thomson states, "The body of Christ was not risen from the grave, but the glorified spirit of Christ, producing visions of Himself for the comfort of His disciples, as if sending telegrams from Heaven to let them know that all was well." However, Scripture does not describe Christ's entrance into heaven in a lowly and meek fashion like His entrance to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, but rather as a triumphant ascension (Heb. 2:14-15; Col. 2:15).

The final theory is the Mystical theory, simply adapting Resurrection concepts from other nations and implementing them into their religious programs. Louis Berkhof in *Systematic Theology* denounces this view: "A new mythical school has come into existence, which discards, or at least dispenses with, theories of vision and apparition, and seeks to account for the resurrection legend by the help of conceptions imported into Judaism from Babylonia and other oriental countries."

Surely the Resurrection was an event in heaven that had reverberations in spiritual realms. Also, when Jesus arose from the dead, He was not restored to normal human life, but to a new sphere of life. These facts give some support to those who interpret the Resurrection in a "nonhistorical" way. But the Resurrection was both a historical event on

earth and a metaphysical phenomenon. To deny the physical while affirming the spiritual is to misinterpret the meaning of words, deny objective principles of interpreting history, and operate from a mistaken bias against the supernatural.

Since history is an analysis of historical cause and effects, the historical Resurrection is the result of a historical cause. The effects cannot be explained by any other cause than the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. In *Jesus and the Gospel*, Denny captures the historical veracity of the Resurrection in his remarks: "The real historical evidence for the resurrection is the fact that it was believed, preached, propagated, and produced its fruit and effect in the new phenomenon of the Christian Church, long before any of our gospels were written."

The historical proof of the physical Resurrection of Jesus Christ abounds. The three prominent arguments are the empty tomb, the appearances to the disciples, and the transformation of the disciples because they saw the Lord. Other arguments include: the rapid emergence of the church (a fellowship of like believers) which claimed to be the body of Christ, who lived in their

The Resurrection of Christ gives meaning to life on earth and life after death.

midst and empowered them for godliness and service; the testimony of various individuals and groups of people who claimed they saw, conversed with, and had fellowship with the resurrected Christ; the transformation of the soul; a Christ-hating persecutor like Paul became a fervent preacher of Jesus Christ; the testimony by Paul and others that the resurrected Christ indwelt them in their physical life on earth; a hermeneutical conviction by the emerging church that correlated the death, burial, and Resurrection of Christ with Old Testament references to the Jewish expected Messiah; the production of a body of literature (New Testament) that comprehensively, completely, and historically explains the purpose, cause, and effect of the Resurrection of Jesus

Christ in a consistent system that corresponds to the rest of Scripture; the inability of the Jewish leaders to disprove the Resurrection in the very city where Christ died and was buried; the use of Sunday as the Christian day of worship instead of the Sabbath; the conversion of James, the brother of Christ, who was opposed to Christian teaching before the Resurrection but later assumed an active role in the Jerusalem Church; and the testimony of Ignatius of Antioch, who was born around A.D. 30. He was later martyred by Emperor Trajan (A.D. 97-117). In the last instance when Ignatius was thrown to the beasts in a Flavian amphitheater in Rome, he wrote: "As for me, I know that even after His resurrection He was in the flesh, and I believe this to be true. For, when He came to those who were with Peter, He said to them: 'Take hold on me and handle and see that I am not a spirit without a body.' And as soon as they touched Him and felt His flesh and pulse, they believed. It is for this reason that they despised death and even showed themselves superior to death. After His resurrection He ate and drank with them like anyone else with a body, although in His spirit He was one with the Father" (Ignatius of Antioch, Epistle to the Smyrnaeans, chapter 3, reprinted in Francis Glimm, *The Apostolic Fathers*, Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1962).

Therefore, the Resurrection of Christ is the foundation of a worldview that gives meaning to life on earth and life after death.

Historical verification cannot give one faith, even if it is an accurate verification of the Resurrection. But one cannot have faith without an object that has credibility (biblical faith is not blind faith). Biblical faith cannot have as its object that which is untrue or that which has no reality (if an interpretation of an event such as the Resurrection is inconsistent with the facts or does not correspond to the existing world, then it is not true). Since biblical faith involves an inner commitment to his understanding of God, an honest person could not commit himself in faith to that which he inwardly knows is false nor faith that he believes does not exist. Therefore, a person could not have biblical faith with an interpretation of a nonhistorical Resurrection.

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