

THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS

(Darrell Bock)

The Background and Importance of the Resurrection

The resurrection of Jesus represents a variation on the Jewish expectation of a bodily resurrection at the end of history. Jews hoped for a resurrection that was followed by a judgment and the vindication of the righteous (Dan. 12:1-4). The variation that Jesus's resurrection introduced was a resurrection in the midst of time with no judgment attached to it. The resurrection produced Jesus's exaltation by God, something Jesus predicted at his examination by the Jewish leadership when he said that the Son of Man (Jesus) would be seated at God's right hand, despite the crucifixion the leadership was contemplating (Mark 14:53-72). In effect, Jesus was saying that God would show who the chosen one was by vindicating him over death.

This point is precisely why the resurrection is so important. Most people think the resurrection is important because it points to life after death. This certainly is a key point of its teaching. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:20-28, Jesus is the first born from the dead (the precedent maker in conquering death). However, more significant is what the resurrection says about Jesus. This is why Paul in the same passage goes on to discuss the exalted role Jesus has because of the resurrection. Jesus's position at God's right hand as a result of resurrection frees him to distribute the blessings of the new era, something Acts 2:30-36 describes.

The Presentation of the Resurrection

Interestingly, nowhere in the New Testament is the resurrection described. Rather, the New Testament records the effects of resurrection as seen in the empty tomb and the appearances. No one witnessed the resurrection; the texts simply testify to the impact of its having taken place. Skeptics often like to claim the early church fabricated these accounts. But what Scripture presents regarding the resurrection works against this claim. First, women were the first witnesses to the empty tomb and receive the first announcement of resurrection. Now women did not have a legal right to be witnesses in the first century. So if you were making up a story to introduce a controversial idea (gentiles did not believe in resurrection and neither did Sadducees), would you pick non-witnesses to begin your case? That is very unlikely. The women open the story because it happened that the women were the first to hear the announcement. Second, if you were creating the story to give it credibility, would you have your chief leaders be so unbelieving upon first hearing the news? When the women report the resurrection to the disciples, the disciples think the women's story is nonsense (Luke 24:11). Only Peter and John go to check to see what took place (Luke 24:12; John 20:3). This unbelief does not put the disciples in a good light in terms of their faith. Yet that is their response. Third, the early church could have made up a simpler story that fit Jewish expectations, if they had created it. They simply could have argued that Jesus would be raised at the end, in line with Jewish expectation, and that he would lead the judgment. But what was expected is not what happened. Something created the third-day precedent of a resurrection within history. Such features in the presentation show that it is very unlikely this account was made up.

Other More Skeptical Tales on Resurrection

Some like to suggest that the resurrection was really only a visionary experience. Usually it is seen to have been grief induced. But this cannot explain the meals Jesus is said to have taken (Luke 24:36-43), nor the group appearances, such as the one to five hundred recorded in 1 Corinthians 15:6. Still others argue that the earliest traditions were empty-tomb traditions, which do not require a resurrected body, and might allow for the removal of the body to create an impression of resurrection. The major problem with this theory, which Matthew 28:13 notes, is the disciples were persecuted for and were willing to die for this belief in resurrection. Those who took the body would have had to be able to do so successfully in the face of the tomb being guarded and then convince others about the resurrection. They would have had to be willing to go to the grave with their secret. This also



cannot explain the starting point of the announcement with women, a point that, again, does not look created. In sum, the best explanation for the resurrection is that it happened.

How Far Back Can We Trace Resurrection Hope in the Church?

The question here is a historical one. A biblical answer is that we see the resurrection being preached almost immediately after the resurrection, as the book of Acts shows. A historical answer (i.e., a case to be made to one who does not regard the Bible in any special theological way) is that we know resurrection is being preached within a few years of the events. Paul's (Saul's) conversion shows this. When Jesus comes and appears to this persecutor of the church (Acts 9), Saul needs to have heard messages about the raised Jesus in order to recognize the raised Jesus appearing to him. This tells us that both a raised and exalted Jesus was in place by the time Paul converted within a few years of Jesus's death.

The Centrality of Resurrection

1 Corinthians 15 says clearly the resurrection is a core event of the Christian faith. It points to an exalted Jesus at God's right hand. It shows there is life after death. This is why the church commemorates this event each year and preaches it so regularly from its pulpits.

Jesus's Post-resurrection Appearances

Some Key Appearance Texts. 1 Corinthians 15:5–8 contains a listing of key appearances by Jesus, outside of the initial appearance to the women in the Gospels. It reads, "He appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also." One of the more informative of the appearances comes to the pair of men walking to Emmaus in Luke 24:13–35. Here they expressed their hope that Jesus might be the promised Messiah, but were as of yet uncertain about the claims of an empty tomb. Jesus eventually opens up the Scripture for them and reveals himself to them. John 20:10–18 shares details of an appearance to Mary Magdalene. The physical nature of Jesus's body is evident when she clings to him. Jesus tells her to let him go, because he must go to the Father. The appearance to Thomas in John 20:24–29 is significant because Jesus appeared to one who doubted and invites him to touch him to see it is really him. This invokes a confession from Thomas of "My Lord and my God," a high point in John's Gospel and a call to believe without having to see a raised Jesus.

Some Observations about the Appearances. First, interestingly, no detail of any private appearance to Peter is recorded. Skeptics like to suggest the church invented these appearance accounts, but this seems very unlikely given there is no "created" private Peter appearance. Nor is there a detailed appearance for James. It is hard to imagine, if the claim to make up such accounts took place, that these appearances would lack details. The failure to have such appearances points to the care of the church in presenting this material. Second, other skeptics like to claim these appearances are the product of hope in the church in the midst of grief, as if these are grief-induced events. But claims about Jesus appearing to five hundred at once stand against such notions of emotional suggestion, especially when Paul notes that many of these folk are still alive. Third, some attempt to distinguish empty tomb accounts from appearance accounts, but this is an artificial distinction made by skeptics who argue that the idea of a physical resurrection is a later development. Finally, there are appearances where Jesus has a meal with the disciples (Luke 24:36–43). These accounts are designed to show the resurrection