

Easter Evidences

What does the resurrection of Jesus tell us about God? This question has a different perspective than the one we usually use. If you are thinking of buying something or joining an organization, we think, “Will this work for me?” And that’s a good thing. “Will it satisfy my needs?” But evaluating the things of God doesn’t work out nearly so well if we approach from that direction. We try to put God in our box, rather than investigating whether God might have a better box.

We think we know, in general, what we want. Some then spend their lives trying to achieve their goals. Most find out, sooner or later, that what they thought would make them satisfied with life really didn’t, so life becomes a big disappointment. Others discover that their goals are unattainable, so they become hopeless. They begin to identify with that beatnik philosopher of the 1950’s, Albert Camus, “Life is Absurd.”

This being Easter sunrise, our traditional special focus on the resurrection of Jesus, let’s investigate what that event can tell us about God. We don’t want to make the same mistakes as those who end up at disappointment or hopelessness by trying to stuff life into a box we made up. Rather, let’s just investigate what God has told us about Himself and build a better box from His point of view instead of from our somewhat shortsighted view.

The first Easter evidence about the resurrection, that Jesus was the long awaited Holy One, the Redeemer, started a thousand years earlier, in a psalm by David, “Nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption.” Peter, in his sermon on the Day of Pentecost recorded in Acts 2, used that line to make the point that, obviously, David had been dead a very long time and his body certainly decomposed centuries earlier. David had written about the Messiah.

What does this tell us about God? Certainly, we understand that God planned for the Redeemer before creation. God has not been playing catch-up all these millennia, figuring out how to fix all the stuff people have messed up. We understand about the sacrifice of Jesus by which He paid the debt to justice for all people of all time when He offered His own blood in the tabernacle in heaven, as described in Hebrews 9. But this is not a Good Friday service. Today we celebrate the Resurrection. What does this resurrection prediction teach us about God? For one thing, God presents evidence of a nature that people cannot do. Further, by laying it out so far in advance, He gives the opportunity to anticipate, which is the foundation of Biblical joy. The faithful know the promises God has made, have long experience that God’s promises always happen as advertised. The anticipation of those promises coming to fruition creates an attitude of joy. Outsiders do not have that. Their anticipation of the future is full of anxiety. Their success rates at achieving a goal are dismal. Whereas the faithful rejoice. In the New Testament we find the phrase, rejoicing in hope, which doesn’t sound so great because our experience with hope has a low batting average. But that’s a problem only in English. In the original language, hope was understood as a confident expectation.

David was not the only one to predict the resurrection of the Redeemer. Jesus quite clearly made the same prediction, and added an even more difficult feature: He said He would rise on the third day.

Just to clear up any potential difficulties that could arise between how we express ourselves versus how they expressed themselves in Jesus’ day, we know from the gospels that Jesus died on a Friday, late afternoon, and was moved into the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea before sundown. Joseph and Nicodemus wanted to get the job done before sundown so that they could go through the unclean-to-clean ritual, since they became unclean by handling a dead body.

They wanted to be able to participate in the High Sabbath of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which they could not do if unclean. We also know from the gospels that Jesus rose on Sunday morning. In our culture, we would call that 36 hours, give or take, not three days. But, in their culture, they counted any little part of a day as a day, so Friday (tiny bit), Saturday (all day), and Sunday (a little less than half a day, since they started counting at sundown, not midnight). Different cultures use different expressions. For those of us in a certain age bracket, we know the song title, "Eight Days a Week." In Britain, if you ask how many days in a week, they will say, "Eight," because they count the little bits on the ends as whole days. As historical proof that Jesus' resurrection was on the third day according to the way they described time, no challenges to the veracity of the gospels was ever recorded in the first few centuries after the resurrection on the basis of Jesus not meeting the third day prediction. In contrast, the reason for the darkness at the crucifixion was publicly debated for centuries, and challenges to resurrection versus the body just being stolen by the disciples became the indefensible position of the Sanhedrin. So, when Jesus said "the third day," everyone who saw Him die knew that Sunday would be the day. That is why the Sanhedrin did not ask for a contingent of Roman soldiers until Saturday, probably late in the day.

Why is it that the Sanhedrin understood what Jesus was predicting and took action, whereas Jesus' closest friends were grieving and did not believe the report of the women who had been to the tomb? This is another of those points in the resurrection story where we learn something very significant about God. He is OK with us not picking up on the obvious the first time around. He is patient. He knows us. He knows we get confused, especially when overcome with emotion or when things are not going as we had so confidently envisioned. Of course, from our point of view in our place and time, we would think that they would have gone to the tomb at sundown of Saturday (which is when Sunday began) and just camped out, confident that what Jesus said was going to happen. But that is not what they did, yet, after a few more stumbles, they did not lose their jobs and God still trusted them to kick off the eternal kingdom in spectacular style.

The physical resurrection of Jesus is much more than an historical event. Of course, that historical event is key to the proof that the earthly Jesus was who He said He was, as John put it, He was God come to earth. But more than that, God demonstrated His love and patience and understanding of us, not giving up on us when we botch what should have been really easy. Looking back over the disastrous history of the church, that patience has continued. In every era, we fix a few things, we mess up some new things. God expects that, eventually, we will get over ourselves and accept the evidence. In multiple places in the New Testament, accepting the resurrection as evidence of the truth of the gospel is deemed essential to acceptable faith in at least nine different places, which are listed in that extra handout. Paul calls this evidence of the resurrection and of redemption of "first important" in 1 Corinthians 15:3.

I won't go through them all, but some, I think, are really striking.

At the top of my list is 1 Corinthians 15:17 – 19. Of course, the longest and most complete discussion of the ramifications of the resurrection is 1 Corinthians 15 – the whole chapter. But, for now, here's verses 17 – 19: "And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins! Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable." The resurrection is the key piece of evidence for Jesus being the Messiah, the Redeemer, the Holy One of God, God come to earth. Without that physical evidence, we are just believing in belief, which is what all other religions do. Christianity stands alone in building its case on physical evidence. Every other religion

demands that you accept what the leadership tells you. We all know that if we just believed every salesman, we would all be broke in month. God is not a salesman. He leads with solid, physical evidence.

When Paul was in Athens, the local philosophers' club invited him to speak because they were having trouble classifying, pigeonholing, what they had heard from Paul's street preaching. In Acts 17:22 – 31 is recorded Paul's speech to the greatest philosophical minds of the day. The conclusion is in verses 30 and 31, "Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead."

There are lots more passages about the importance of the evidence for Jesus' resurrection, and many are listed on the extra handout. If we were in sub-Saharan Africa, I would cover them all in an hour or two, but that's not our culture. So, moving on to point number 2 of the Easter evidences, evidence that we, too, will be raised on Judgment Day. The proof of this arises from the historical certainty that Jesus rose from the dead as predicted almost 2000 years ago.

In Jesus' day, not everyone thought that a general resurrection of all people would become a reality. Remember that there were two major parties in Israel, the Pharisees and the Sadducees, plus some smaller ones like the Herodians, the Essenes, and the Zealots. The Sadducees were the majority party; the High Priest was a Sadducee. Sadducees did not believe in a general resurrection, but rather that, when you are dead, you are dead. That's it. They interpreted the various passages in the prophets about eternal life as figures of speech. You live on through your descendants. Therefore, having children and grandchildren was really important. Also, they believed that you are judged on this earth, not at a Judgment Day, which is why they held that ridiculous notion that the rich and powerful were favored by God, while the poor and the handicapped, obviously, had been cursed by God. That is the source of the question from the disciples about the man born blind in John 9, "Who sinned, this man or his parents?"

Other religions have their own explanations about the circle of life. Of course, there are those like the Sadducees who don't have a circle. They just have a line; you start, you finish, end of story. Re-incarnation was taught by some in various parts of the world, then and now, that when you die, you come back as something else, partially dependent on how well you did with the previous life. Others have a manipulation system, where you essentially trick your god into giving you a better afterlife. We see variations on all of them to this day. The reason they all sound so ridiculous to us is because none of them could deal with justice. They had no answer to the demands of justice as far as it regards eternal life. If we leave out Jesus' resurrection which proved that His claims of being the Redeemer are true, then no one obtains a good result on that day. Everyone messed up somewhere and they have no means by which to satisfy justice.

We have the same problem in our civil justice system. If someone is convicted of a crime, the offender pays a fine or goes to jail. When the smoke clears, we say, "He paid his debt to society." But that is not actually true. For example, our hypothetical person now has a criminal record, employment becomes a problem. Voting? Where to live? On top of that, any victims, while perhaps compensated, but probably not, still have repercussions from the event. There is a ripple effect as the crime affects some people, then they affect some people, and it just goes on and on. We cannot reel back in all of the consequences of one bad choice. Now multiply that by the number of people and how frequently they choose badly. We simply cannot undo what we have done. The resurrection of Jesus provides tangible evidence that the Redeemer's job has been successfully completed. All the debts of all the people have been paid. But, it is not that

God is any more successful at reeling back the ripples than we are. He would have to start erasing memories and undoing time. Instead, God solved the problem by sending the indwelling Spirit to all the faithful, imparting the ability to overcome all those aftereffects of sin, whether mine or someone else's.

What does this teach us about God? The historical reality of the resurrection of Jesus illustrated that a general resurrection will happen one day. It will come like a thief in the night, a figure of speech used by Jesus, Paul, and Peter. Jesus taught in four different places about a general resurrection of all people of all time, what we call Judgment Day. The New Testament writers did the same, in twelve places. The longest and most detailed description is, again, in 1 Corinthians 15. Here is a representative passage from verses 20 – 24, “But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since by man came death, by Man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. But each one in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ's at His coming. Then comes the end, when He delivers the kingdom to God the Father, when He puts an end to all rule and authority and power.” But, what does this teach us about God?

First, I think, God wants us to deal with reality, not fantasy. Our redemption plus the indwelling Spirit doesn't make our pasts disappear, but the faithful have the ability to accept the well-documented proof that the Redeemer successfully executed His mission, and we are assured, with a preponderance of evidence that we can handle the fallout from our checkered pasts.

Second, God is big on illustrations. And that is not a small point. Think about the Sermon on the Mount. The theme from beginning to end was the concept of being consistent. In fact, the word that is in our English Bibles as “perfect,” would be much closer to the original language if translated “consistent.” From the middle of the speech, Matthew 5:48, “Be ye consistent as your heavenly Father is consistent.” The concept of being consistent makes parables work. The principles acted out in those down-to-earth stories were understood by the audience. Jesus' point was, “Now take that same principle and apply it over here.”

The concept of the Word, like in John 1:1, “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” The Word was a concept from Greek philosophy that described the principles that held everything together: math, science, philosophy. All were governed, concluded the great philosophers, by the same set of principles. So, God packed 15 symbols into the Lord's Supper and ten into baptism. The physical resurrection of Jesus, an historical fact, also illustrated that a general resurrection of all people had already been planned.

And, the third Easter evidence, the resurrection of Jesus, in addition to being proof that Jesus was who He said He was, the Redeemer who was the only answer to the justice question, the illustration that a general resurrection and judgment are a sure thing, this resurrection also illustrated and guaranteed our spiritual resurrection when we come to faith. The concept is plainly described in Romans 6, beginning in verse 1, “What shall we say, then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it? Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore, we were buried with Him in baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.”

The resurrection of Jesus illustrates the extreme nature of Biblical faith. We die to sin, our old man was crucified with Him, we die to slavery to sin, we die to the fear of death. We look to

Jesus' crucifixion as the model for the extreme nature of our own rejection of the ways of this world, and the miraculous nature of our spiritual resurrection. Now, in our day, many people use "spiritual" improperly, to describe some poorly defined personal philosophy about God. In the Bible, the spirit, that which is spiritual, has to do with the part of each of us that will last forever. Among people who are still breathing, that spirit is associated with a mortal body, although spirits lack GPS coordinates. When our organic part gives out, the spirit part keeps going, in one place or the other. The parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16 is a good reference. When we die, faithful folks go to a nice place; unfaithful folks go to a bad place. The separation of the two groups is God's to control, not mine. At Judgment, those in the good place go to a brand new and better place; those in the bad place go to a worse place. Jesus' resurrection was the original model that gives us a confident expectation that we will rise, too, not only at the end of time, but also when we get a handle on faith and we are raised from disconnected, dead, spirits to connected, live spirits: our spiritual resurrection.

So, what does this tell us about God?

First, God planned out His evidence very carefully so those who wanted to know which message was from the one true and living God, among all the ideas that have been put forward from a multitude of sources, would have concrete evidence and a confident expectation. Second, He planned out His illustrations very carefully so we would be assured of our own resurrections, and also our spiritual resurrections. Paul called our spiritual resurrections being transformed into the image of Jesus. Peter described it as taking on the divine nature. Peter, in Acts 2, appealed to the crowd, "Be saved from this perverse generation." Later, in 2 Peter, he assures the faithful, that they have escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.

So why did God build this Titanic on which we live? Oftentimes it seems that this world has already hit the iceberg and will sink sooner rather than later. But the brokenness of the world is part of the plan. The universe was created as an incubator for faith. This combination of natural and man-made disasters in which we live gives us a clear choice. On the self-deception side, we could make excuses or we could set about to conquer the brokenness, options that only the self-deceived would try. Or, we can take God at His word, that He has the answers to life, both for this one and the next. The resurrection of Jesus holds it all together.