

What Are They Saying About Jesus- II



What brought people to faith in Jesus of Nazareth as the *Messiah* or *Christ* of God? For Christianity, the reality of Jesus is grounded in the events surrounding his death and confession that he was raised and exalted by the Father to a new, eschatological life. Or, another way to put this, he was transformed from death to the final state of being. The Church uses words that describe this new reality such as, resurrection, exaltation to the right hand of the Father, and glorification. How the early members of the Church came to make such a confession about Jesus is what we will explore in this part of the series.

With the sheer explosion of books on Jesus and his resurrection in the last three decades there exists a mountain of work to examine. Given the limitations of the size of this series I will summarize the major streams of scholarship on this issue as best I can.

It all began early on the third day after Jesus' death on the cross. Mary Magdalene and other women brought the message to the apostles who were holed up in a locked room for fear of suffering the same fate as their Master. The women brought the most shocking and joyous news, that the tomb where the crucified Jesus was buried was empty! Not only that, it was joyous news because they proclaimed that Jesus had been raised by the Father to new life! This is how it all began. If not for Easter then Jesus of Nazareth would most likely have been forgotten as perhaps a person who led a reform movement in Judaism during the Roman occupation but who, like so many before him, ran afoul of the Roman authorities and was brutally killed as an enemy of Rome. But we are told that something happened that changed everything. In his book, *Jesus*, Martin Dibelius remarks:

The New Testament narratives show that...the disciples...fled (Mark 14:50), and gave up Jesus' cause for lost (Luke 24:19-21). Something must have happened in between, which in a short time not only produced a complete reversal of their attitude but also enabled them to engage in renewed activity and to found the primitive Christian community. This "something" is the historical kernel of Easter faith. p.141



Martin Dibelius

St. Paul reminds us in I Corinthians 15, that the event of the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the centerpiece of the Christian confession of the reality of Jesus the Christ, and what the Father is communicating through the Son, which is experienced in the Holy Spirit; that love and life are the future! He reminds us that if Christ has not been raised then our faith is in vain and we are to be pitied. In effect, everything hinges on the resurrection of Jesus. For the historian it is important to have some explanation as to why a frightened group of men, fearing that they too would be crucified if they showed their faces in public, should become fearless preachers of the Gospel who would be willing to die for that message. For the historian something has to account for that! For Christian believers it is the power of the resurrection of Jesus Christ that explains it all.

What Happened to the Crucified Jesus?



Wolfhart Pannenberg

Scholars, believers, and non-believers often ask the question, *what really happened on Easter?* This one question has led to a voluminous amount of writing and scholarship to explain what precisely happened on Easter morning. It is one thing to proclaim Jesus the Christ has been raised from the dead; it is another thing to explain what actually happened. Once one plunges into the material one comes away with the understanding that no one can say with absolute certainty what actually happened. Many biblical scholars and theologians remind us that such an act remains in God as the ultimate mystery and is not subject to equating it with other facts in history because this is a trans-historical event; a real event not open to historical verification except in how it impacted on the first witnesses. However, there are some theologians, Wolfhart Pannenberg is one of them, who maintain that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is a historical event and must be subject to the scrutiny of historians **1**. Though there is much to commend this approach, many scholars disagree with it and offer a caution that one can only go so far with historical reconstruction efforts. Even the historical case for the empty tomb, to be discussed later, does not prove a resurrection. For the early witnesses

it was the appearances of Jesus that convinced them of his resurrection (Mark 16, Luke 24, Matt.28, John 21). Anglican Biblical scholar and former Bishop of Durham, N.T. Wright sums it up in his book, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection and the Mission of the Church*, this way:

The only way we can explain the phenomenon we have been examining is by proposing a two-pronged hypothesis: first, Jesus' tomb really was empty; second, the disciples really did encounter him in ways that convinced them that he was not simply a ghost or hallucination. p.58



N.T. Wright

So what really happened? That question can only be answered completely when the Lord comes with the fullness of the Kingdom of God at the *parousia* **2**. However, scholarly discussion revolves around the issues of the empty tomb, and the appearances of the risen Lord to the early witnesses. Scholars seem to be divided about 50-50 when it comes to the historical validity of the empty tomb. For instance, Pannenberg argues for a high degree of certainty for the empty tomb. While, someone such as, Hans Kung, is doubtful about the empty tomb **3**. So it will serve us if we articulate the arguments for the tomb of Jesus being empty on Easter morning and the implications of this for our understanding of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Empty Tomb



The story of the empty tomb appears in all four gospels. This fact points to the ancient and important role of the empty tomb in the Easter proclamation. Had the tomb not been empty those who denied the resurrection of Jesus could merely have pointed the

tomb as still containing the remains of the historical Jesus. It is important to note here that Jewish anthropology did not believe in a body soul/duality. Any concept of immortality was tied to the transformation of the total person. Hence, the doctrine of resurrection is grounded in the God who creates all things so that all will ultimately share in God's own being—the completed, eschatological reality. Also, it was women, Mary Magdalene in particular, who brought the news of the empty tomb. In a culture that did not allow women to testify in a court of law, it is very important to observe that the early Church felt that they could not remove the testimony of the women about the empty tomb or the appearance of the risen Christ because it was the way it happened and so the Church did not modify this testimony of the women. Lastly, the detractors of Christianity assume that the tomb was empty but attributed it to the dubious proposition that the apostles removed the body. **4**



Gerald O' Collins

Fr. Gerald O' Collins points out that the story of the empty tomb is supported by a number of biblical scholars and theologians such as: Raymond Brown, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Walter Kasper, Xavier Leon-Dufour, Joseph Fitzmyer, Reginald Fuller, John Murphy- O'Connor, N.T. Wright, and Edward Schillebeeckx to name only a few.⁵ Of course, the empty tomb is not necessary for belief in the resurrection of Jesus, nor can it prove it. It was the Father's revealing the risen Christ to the early witnesses that convinced people that Jesus had been raised, and this illuminates the meaning of the empty tomb. However, the fact of the empty tomb does have significance in how we understand resurrection. In speaking of the resurrection some have tried to reinterpret or dismiss bodily resurrection. There is a danger of a lurking doceticism in such a position that logically leads to a rejection of this worldly creation. Raymond Brown puts it this way:

*The fact that these future possibilities for Christians are patterned on what God has already done for Jesus lends a special importance to the question of bodily resurrection. In man's anticipation of God's ultimate plan, one of two models is usually followed: the model of eventual destruction and new creation, or the model of transformation. Will the material world pass away and all be made anew, or will somehow the world be transformed and changed into the city of God? The model the Christian chooses will have an effect on his attitude toward the world and toward the corporeal. What will be destroyed can only have passing value; what is to be transformed retains its importance.*⁶



Raymond Brown

Clearly the Easter message conveys that the Crucified is the risen One. He is the same but different Jesus who walked among us but who now is revealed as the Lord. Jesus revealed his identity by his wounds which points to the fact that that it is the same Jesus who is now raised to the right hand of God. This is a model of transformation. It is the model of transformation that is the very hallmark of the Roman Catholic understanding of the sacraments, life and death, and eternal life. We will continue this series with a discussion about the meaning of the resurrection and then proceed to investigate the ministry and death of Jesus and how it is all linked to resurrection faith and the saving reality of the Christ Event.

Notes

1 Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus: God and Man* (Great Britain: The Westminster Press, 1968) pp. 1-35. He engages in a through study of the historical reliability of the empty tomb stories. Since they appear in all four gospels these stories need to be taken seriously and connected to the original events of Easter.

2 Jurgen Moltmann, *The Theology of Hope: On the Ground and Implications of a Christian Eschatology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993) pp. 1-17. For Moltmann, Easter is the lynchpin of all Christian theology connected with the cross of Christ. He elaborates on this in his book, *The Crucified God*.

3 Hans Kung, *On Being a Christian* (Garden City, New York; Doubleday, 1984), pp. 343-365. kung relies on the approach of Rudolf Bultmann's demythologizing approach. Many scholars appreciate Bultmann's approach but find his method too divorced from the historical character of revelation.

4 N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: Harper-Collins, 2008) pp. 55-59. Bishop Wright is a formidable Scripture scholar whose arguments are taken seriously even by his detractors.

5 Gerald O' Collins, *Jesus Risen* (New York, Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1987) p. 123. Fr. O'Collins', S.J. work is well-respected by Protestant and Catholic scholars. He taught at the Gregorian in Rome for many years.

6 Raymond Brown, S.S., *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus* (New York:Paulist Press, 1973) p. 128-129. The dean of Roman Catholic Scripture Studies was known for his judicious and meticulous scholarship. This book is an important piece of work on the Resurrection.

Deacon Robert M. Pallotti, D.Min.

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Jesus Christ was neither killed nor was he crucified, as alleged by the Christians and the Jews, but that he was alive! because: 1. Jesus was reluctant to die! He had worked out a strategy of defence to repel the Jews. What is more interesting is What happened to the Jews who crucified Jesus. What a story. But we shall leave that for another question. The crucifixion of Jesus occurred in 1st-century Judea, most likely between AD 30 and 33. Soldiers crucified Jesus and casted lots for his clothes. This happened at nine in the morning on the day of Passover (14:12, 15:25). Luke 23:33-34. [No drink offered]. Soldiers crucified Jesus and casted lots for his clothes. Jesus: "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing." [60]. [No time indication]. John 19:18, 23-24. [No drink offered]. Early in the second century another reference to the crucifixion of Jesus was made by Tacitus, generally considered one of the greatest Roman historians. [68][69] Writing in The Annals (c. 116 AD), Tacitus described the persecution of Christians by Nero and stated (Annals 15.44) that Pilate ordered the execution of Jesus: [66][70].