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The Garden Tomb - Jerusalem

THE RESURRECTION truth or wish-fulfilling hallucination

In the 1940s there was a British Radio personality called Professor Joad. He was erudite (Double first at Balliol), eloquent and sharp, but he was uncertain of his faith until his conversion. He was featured regularly on a very popular programme "Any Questions". One day he was challenged: "If you could ask any question of anyone alive or dead, who and what would it be?" After a moment's thought he answered, "The person would be Jesus Christ and the question would be, did you or did you do not rise from the dead?"

Of course he was right; it is the most important question anyone can ask. Why? Because if Jesus did not rise from the dead our whole faith is built on a lie; the apostles were liars; saints down the ages have died for a lie; Jesus did not conquer sin or death; our hopes of eternal life are false; our church, our Fellowship, our favourite Charities - Barnabas Fund, SASRA and Christian Concern - are all based on a lie. Paul stressed in the fifteenth chapter of his first letter to the Church in Corinth that the

truth of the resurrection is central to our faith -**"Without the resurrection our preaching and our beliefs are meaningless."**

One of Britain's greatest jurists, Sir Edmund Clarke, wrote "In any court of mine the evidence for the resurrection would be accepted as overwhelming." As far as we know he never had the opportunity to demonstrate that claim. If he had, my suspicion is that whereas the vast majority of his jury would have supported the resurrection, there would have been one, two or three, not yet ready to commit. Perhaps in this upper room of ours this morning the same could be said. Almost all of us believe in the resurrection, but if there are even one or two with us who are still unsure I would like to dedicate my sermon to them in the hope that on this Easter Sunday morning they might come at last to a sure faith. .

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I ask you to imagine that we are sitting here in a court of law and that you are a member of the Jury considering the truth of the Resurrection. You will have been presented with contrasting views by the opposing learned counsels. They have now concluded their submissions and I, as the judge, have the duty to rehearse and comment on what you have heard and then call upon you to withdraw and decide.

Counsel against the truth of the resurrection has based his attack on the view that it was not resurrection but **wish-fulfilling hallucination among Jesus's followers** . This is the proposition of the German theologian, Straus, famous for his remark - "It was their love that resurrected Jesus.". This claim deserves very careful scrutiny as we shall see.

This Counsel has also pointed out that the vast majority of commentators, including leading churchmen, and many bishops dismiss the resurrection as little more than a myth.

Counsel for the truth of the resurrection , on the other hand had based his case on four pieces of evidence which I urge you to examine closely.

Let us look again at these four pieces of evidence:

1. The body had gone. There can be no doubt that it had gone. There were only two groups who would have had an interest in stealing the body, His followers and the Authorities.

His followers would have had a tough time doing so. At the express wish of the Chief Priest and the Pharisees, Pilate had ordered "Make the tomb as secure as you know how." The guard had been doubled. The stone had been put firmly in place and sealed with rope and wax. When they were accused, the followers answered the authorities - "You killed Him, but God raised Him and we are witnesses". It has been pointed out that these were hardly the words of a group guilty of a recent robbery.

The authorities had more of a motive. If they had stolen the body they would certainly have displayed it to dispel finally Jesus's repeated claim that He would rise from the dead. But they didn't because they couldn't.

So the body had gone. You have heard the Counsel against the resurrection attempt to explain this undoubted fact:

- A. Mary could have gone to **the wrong tomb** in the early morning light,? Possible, but certainly not Peter and John in broad daylight and certainly not Joseph of Arimathea whose tomb it was!
- B. **The Swoon Theory**; The idea that Jesus didn't actually die on the cross but swooned. In the cool of the tomb he regained consciousness, took off his spice-laden bindings, moved the stone and emerged! This theory should not carry any weight with you. The Romans were very good at putting men to death. When the sword was thrust into Jesus' side, if He had still been alive warm red blood would have flowed; but it didn't. Instead blood and water flowed - clot and serum - and as we have heard from an expert witness this was undeniable evidence that the heart had ceased to function. Moreover when the women took his body to lay it in the tomb they would have noticed Jesus's breathing however shallow. You have heard that Jesus had been beaten within an inch of his life even before being crucified. I am sure that you will not be persuaded

that Jesus could have recovered his strength in the tomb sufficient to free Himself from a hundredweight of spices and bindings, move the sealed stone and emerge without being seen.

2. The second piece of evidence bears this out: **The Body had gone but the grave clothes had not.** When Peter and John reached the tomb they looked in. The grave clothes were undisturbed, the head linen being separate from the main body linen. It was the custom to bind the body and the head separately leaving the neck uncovered. Both sets of linen, no longer supported, had simply collapsed . Jesus had not had to unwind Himself or be unwound as had Lazarus in the miracle of his **resuscitation**. Counsel for the truth has asserted that **i** Jesus' body had been transmuted through the linen. It was not a miracle of **resuscitation**; **it was a miracle of resurrection**. John saw this, understood and believed that Jesus had risen from the dead as He had said He would.

3. The third piece of evidence which you have heard, are **the written records that Jesus appeared in His resurrection body on at least eleven occasions**. First He appeared to Mary Magdalene at the entrance to the tomb and then to the two disciples on the road from Jerusalem down to Emmaus, one of whom was probably Peter . They were so excited that they walked the ten miles uphill to Jerusalem in the dark to tell the disciples that they had been with Jesus. Jesus then appeared to the ten disciples in the Upper Room and some days later to the eleven (including Thomas this time). He then appeared to about five hundred in the Tiberias region and to James, His brother. Next He appeared to Peter and his fellow fishermen on the shore when they returned from an abortive night's fishing. He appeared to many of His disciples at the time of His Ascension; and finally after His ascension He appeared to Saul on the road to Damascus.

Members of the Jury, these alleged appearances face you with a profound credibility test. Were they plain lies? If they were inventions one has to say that they bare the mark of a diabolically clever, centrally orchestrated deception. If they were lies then you cannot trust anything that any of the apostles said or wrote It is more likely that they were not inventions. The language used to describe them is artless, the accounts

have the ring of truth; all the accounts have a consistency.. I draw your attention, members of the Jury, to the fact that **the doubters have not claimed that they were lies, rather that they were genuine wish-fulfilling hallucinations.** "It was their love that resurrected Jesus," claimed Strauss. I must ask you to examine this claim very carefully, because it is the main plank of the proposition that there was no resurrection.

. You have heard an expert witness explain that **group hallucinations** are effectively unheard of and never involve any **physical manifestation**, such as inviting Thomas to place his hands in Jesus' side, nor of cooking and eating fish on the Tiberias shore. As for "wish-fulfilment" the disciples were so far from expecting Jesus to rise from the dead that they refused at first to believe the clearest evidence like that of the two disciples from Emmaus. You may have difficulty in giving much weight to this hallucination theory and nor should you. This leaves only one other possibility - that the appearances after the crucifixion were true.

4..Members of the jury, the Fourth and final piece of evidence that has been presented in support of the resurrection has been neither challenged nor disputed. It is that those who met with the Risen Jesus were evidently changed. Four examples will suffice. It was the resurrection that changed the frightened Peter from insisting that he had never met the Lord into a bold public speaker who led thousands to become followers. It was the resurrected Jesus who changed James a persistent agnostic - finding it especially hard to believe that his brother was the Messiah - into a powerful leader of the early church - actually the first President of the Jerusalem Council. It was the resurrected Jesus who caused **doubting Thomas** to proclaim "My Lord and My God" and to become thereafter one of the most effective apostles. It was the resurrected Jesus who changed Saul, a passionate enemy of the early Christian Church into Paul, the greatest advocate of the faith which he had tried so urgently to destroy. Finally it was the resurrection that changed Shabbat - Saturday - into the Sabbath - Sunday.

At this point I took off my notional Judges' wig - and addressed the congregation. Members of this congregation, I don't ask you merely to

believe that the resurrection of Jesus was probably true . Rather I ask you to affirm that what had been repeatably predicted by Jesus himself -that He would rise from the dead on the third day -is indeed one of the best attested facts in history.

Why is this so important today, here among us? **You realise that in believing in the resurrection you will be in a minority.** The vast majority do not believe in Jesus, let alone that he rose from the dead.

If you do believe that Jesus rose from the dead you may face ridicule from your friends; in many parts of the world today you must be prepared to face persecution and even death as so many are doing every day, especially where Islam is strong. If you do believe that Jesus rose from the dead you will be amongst his followers,- His body on earth. You will have His Holy Spirit within and around you - to help, to guide and to protect you in this life. And there is more. When your body and mind die your soul, which will not die, will be in paradise until the day of our resurrection. This was the promise by Jesus to the penitent, believing thief, in one of the last complete sentences that Jesus uttered from the cross.

A word of prayer based on John 3 16. Amen.

Readings:

Old Testament Psalm 118 vv 14-24

New Testament 1 Corinthians 15 vv 12 - 26

Gospel. John 20 v 1-18

Hymns:

1) **147** Jesus Christ is risen today:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_6sj9ljVsfk

2) **160** Thine be the glory:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bPjTfw4a2ZE>

3) **145** Good Christians all rejoice and sing

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RowIQiLOjTU>

4) 468 Lord of the dance

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cYL7KrYnfLO>