

View From The Tomb

By

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The nature of the Resurrection of Jesus makes the difference between speculative mysticism and faith that immortal life is real.

The word “resurrection” is derived from two Latin words: “re” and “surgo.” “Re” means “again,” and “surgo” means to “rise.” Resurrection means to rise again. Most other religions of the world teach the doctrine of spiritual survival, immortality of the soul, but Jesus taught the resurrection of the whole person, which includes the body.

The philosophy of the Greeks (Plato) had an influence on the early church and from it came the idea that the Christian hope is to escape from the body. The doctrine presented by Jesus and the apostles is not escape from the body, but rather a resurrection of the body. Jesus insisted that instead of escaping the body at death He would win over death by raising His body from the grave. This became history. It took place in time and space, that is, three days after the crucifixion and outside the city of Jerusalem. He came out of the tomb a corporeal body, not as a ghost.

From the empty tomb John and Peter returned to the upper room where the other apostles were puzzling over the news that the tomb was empty. As they were talking Jesus suddenly stood before them. Here was the one whose agonizing crucifixion they had witnessed three days earlier. His lifeless body they had wrapped and lovingly laid in the tomb. It is easy to understand their shock and fear in seeing Him standing alive before them. “Why are you troubled? And wherefore do questionings arise in your heart?” He asked. “See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Handle me, and see; for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you behold me having” (Luke 24:38–39).

It has become a common idea, expressed in numerous writings, that the resurrection proves that there is no death, that man doesn’t really die! Were that the case then the apostles would be wrong about Jesus. They emphasized the fact of His death. Paul defines the gospel as the fact that Jesus died according to the scriptures, “that he was buried” and that He was raised again on the third day (I Cor. 15:1–4). Why say “that he was buried” but to point up the fact that a resurrection involves a body, a body that died in the common sense of the word and then was brought to life again? Jesus Himself said, “I was dead and behold I am alive forevermore” (Rev. 1:18). The heart of the gospel is the fact that Jesus actually died, that He gave up His life for us, that His life was restored, that He arose again from the dead. As James D. Strauss wrote in the *Restoration Herald*, “To insist on a resurrection that did not involve a body would be to impose on the early Christians a notion out of harmony with their witness. Sleep is a figure for death in the New Testament and rising from sleep suggests something of what is involved in rising from the dead.”

We cannot by our own scientific research, nor by our physical or spiritual powers, see beyond death into the future to know the ultimate meaning and purpose of God. But Jesus, by dying a human death and then rising to life again, gives us the concrete example of what God has in store for every faithful Christian.

Christ came into the world to reveal truth, to reveal life and the way to attain it. “I am the way, the truth and the life.” His death revealed that the wages of sin is death; by dying for us He met the penalty for our sins so that we may be free from sin and thus free from death. If the price Christ paid for sin was death, then death was to be the ultimate price that every unbeliever must pay in the day of judgment.

Christ’s resurrection reveals the truth about eternal life, that it is to be real, embodied and personal. Paul wrote his letters to the Corinthians to correct a great many errors in their thinking, one of the being that of the resurrection of the dead. Apparently many of them did not understand that the dead were to be raised. Their concept of eternal life may have been like that of many people today, that it is to be spiritual and ethereal only. So Paul wrote, “Now if Christ is preached that he has been raised from the dead, how say some among you that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead neither has Christ been raised...For if the dead are not raised neither has Christ been raised: and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is vain; you are yet in your sins. Then they also that are fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If we have only hoped in Christ in this life, we are of all men most pitiable. But now has Christ been raised from the dead the first-fruits of them that are asleep” (I Cor. 15:12–20). Paul reasons that if there is not resurrection of the dead the, of course, Christ has not risen from the dead. More than that he says, “Then they also that are fallen asleep in Christ have perished.

Man wants to think that life goes on somehow, somewhere; that there is not death, that it is only a transition. But Paul says there is no hope outside of a resurrection, that if there is not resurrection then even the dead in Christ have perished. Man has no inherent right to life. He perishes if there is no resurrection. But Paul hastens to say, Christ has been raised from the dead, the first-fruits of them that are asleep.

The life Christ offers is a resurrection life. As John Updike so ably put it in his “Seven Stanzas at Easter”:

“Make no mistake: if He rose at all it was as His body.
If the cells’ dissolution did not reverse, the molecules
re-knit, the amino acids re-ignite, the church will fall.

It was not as the flowers, each soft Spring recurrent;
It was not as His Spirit in the mouths and fuddled
eyes of the eleven apostles; It was as His flesh: ours.

Let us not mock God with metaphor,
analogy, sidestepping, transcendence;
Making of the even a parable, a sign printed in
the faded credulity of earlier ages:
Let us walk through the door.”

The Jesus who died is the Jesus who arose—flesh and bones, not a mere spirit. Not a bodiless spirit that many people might erroneously call a soul. His resurrected life is placed in contrast to his death. The point He made, both in teaching and in His example, was that the alternative to death is a resurrection that is a restoration of the whole person. The same truth hold with regard to the promise of death. The alternative to

eternal life is eternal death, the death of the whole person. Jesus told the apostles that they were not to fear man but rather to “fear him who is able to destroy both body and being in Gehenna” (Mt. 10:28).

The cross tells us the meaning of judgment and death. The open tomb tells us the meaning of immortal life by resurrection. The resurrection of the Christian will be to a life that is immortal (no longer subject to death). On the other hand immortality is never offered nor promised to a sinner. Only Jesus has immortality according to I Timothy 6:16. But every person who is redeemed by His death will be made immortal when He comes again. “We shall be like him” (I John 3:2). From the time of Adam man has regarded the grave with fearful solemnity, and well he might, “for it is appointed unto men once to die and after this comes judgment” (Heb. 9:27).

We are all mortal (subject to death) and we live in a temporal world which is “passing away” and which, in fact, is “stored up for fire, being reserved against the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men” (II Peter 3:7).

Paul writes that the whole creation groans and travails awaiting the consummation of God’s plan (Rom. 8:22) and that “even we ourselves groan within ourselves waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body” (Rom. 8:23). So there are two views from the tomb, one which sees judgment, condemnation and destruction in the final consuming fire; the other which looks to the fulfillment of the eternal purpose of God for man to be resurrected and conformed to His image.

Usually at this point the question arises as to whether the resurrected body is identical with the body that dies. The body of Christ that died was the body that arose; however, there were some changes and after His ascension He was glorified in the body. The resurrection implies that there will be a change. The person placed in the grave will be the person and personality resurrected. The difference is that the new person will have a body that is incorruptible, powerful and glorious (I Cor. 15:42–44). The curse of death and atrophy will be removed forever so that we may be the immortal people of God reflecting the very glory and beauty of God in the body He will fashion anew, “that is may be conformed to the body of His glory” (Phil. 3:21).

According to the Apostle Paul there is one hope; therefore, we do not have a variety of future possibilities to choose from. Either we have the one hope of resurrection to immortality or we have none.

The Christian church lives in hope of a resurrection to a real personal life in eternity. We seek to pattern life after Christ with the firm expectation that someday we actually will become like Him, pure, glorious, and immortal.

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