

The Resurrection of Jesus Christ

'The Rattle of Dead Men's Bones'

David Gooding

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Thank you Mr Chairman for those very kind and perhaps overly generous remarks. Allow me, ladies and gentlemen, first to discharge a very pleasant duty, which is to thank the organisers of this event for allowing me the opportunity and pleasure of addressing such an attractive audience. Our topic tonight, as you have heard, is *The Resurrection of Jesus Christ*. The second part of the title, *The Rattle of Dead Men's Bones*, was deliberately chosen to echo the words of a former Bishop of Durham.¹ Objecting to the idea that our Lord's body was raised from the dead he said that, if it were so, it would have been a conjuring trick with bones.

Our theme tonight, then, is the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ and, in particular, our task will be to try to determine as best we may what is meant by the term 'resurrection' when we talk of the resurrection of Christ. In days gone by, of course, and for many centuries, the term 'resurrection' would have been understood in its straightforward, simple sense and nobody doubted that, when the Bible declares, 'Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures' (1 Cor 15:3-4), it meant simply what it says. Our Lord was dead on Calvary, his dead body was buried in a grave, and three days later that body was raised from the dead.

But it's common knowledge that, in this last one hundred and fifty years, theologians, and among them many Christian theologians, have suggested that it is now impossible for us to accept that the resurrection of Jesus Christ was, in fact, a bodily resurrection, and that we are not obliged to think that it was by the terms in which the New Testament describes it.

Opposing views

There have been many suggestions, of course. Some, like the famous Professor Bultmann,² suggested that nowadays we cannot possibly believe the account of the resurrection as we find it in the New Testament. His argument was that in those days people were scientifically very primitive. They believed, so Bultmann would have us think, in a three-decker universe, with heaven up aloft, the earth in the middle and hell somewhere down beneath Australia. And they said that the Christians talked about Jesus Christ being buried and going down to hell, then rising again, coming back to earth and going back to heaven. But because we cannot possibly accept the idea of a three-decker universe like that, then we can't accept what the early Christians said about the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

¹ David Jenkins (1925-2016), Bishop of Durham 1984-94.

² Rudolf Karl Bultmann (1884-1976). German Lutheran theologian and professor of New Testament at the University of Marburg.

It was Bultmann's idea; it has become very popular amongst theological students, and therefore it has been propounded in many of our schools. Their idea was that, when the Christians talked about the resurrection of Christ, they were using rather mythical language to get across their ideas. If we want to know what really happened we must decode what the Christians have said, come to the heart of their message in plain, straightforward English and dismiss all the peripheral, mythical ideas that they have spun around it. They say when you do that, the meaning of the resurrection is that nothing at all happened objectively. The body of Jesus Christ was buried, it remained buried and, as far as anybody knows, it is still mouldering in the grave.

What happened was that the early Christians were, first of all, horribly disappointed when Jesus, whom they had come to think was the Messiah, was crucified and then buried. Initially they felt everything was lost, but suddenly in their hearts there arose the feeling, 'Let's get up and have another go at things,' and that renewed courage is what they really meant by 'the resurrection of Jesus Christ.'

A little bit of a tall story, as you will see. How did the early Christians ever come to have the idea that they'd get up and have another go, when they knew, according to this theory, that the body of Jesus Christ was still mouldering in the grave? And how did they ever get the courage to preach to the world that Jesus Christ was risen from the dead, when all the while, as I say, they knew that his body was still in the grave? I don't know that Bultmann had any answer to these questions. That is one view.

At one stage I heard a lecturer in education at Stranmillis College in Belfast. Her duty was to teach students (not for Stranmillis, but elsewhere in the city) how to teach the Bible in schools. She said that this was the view that we ought nowadays to put across to students.

Another different view that is put forward nowadays is that, while the tomb was indeed found to be empty (and few serious scholars doubt that fact nowadays), that has nothing to say to our idea of the resurrection, because the whole story of the resurrection is not to tell us that the dead body of Jesus Christ came out of the grave.

That whole idea, as the former Bishop of Durham suggested, would be unworthy; a kind of 'juggling with dead men's bones.' The idea of the resurrection is, rather, that death doesn't end everything and, therefore, somehow or other, when the Bible says that Jesus was raised from the dead, what it means is the real Jesus, the inner man, was not destroyed by death, but survived his crucifixion and burial and is now in God's heaven. It was not, therefore, a literal resurrection of the body of Jesus Christ.

Two views, therefore, and I shall not bother you with the many permutations that are spun around these ideas.

The Biblical view

We come, of course, to the traditional view; what the New Testament actually says it means.

that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures. (1 Cor 15:3-4)

And because he bodily rose from the dead, when the disciples went to the tomb early on Easter morning they found the tomb empty. The body was no longer there, for the simple reason that Christ had bodily risen from the dead.

So we have three different views of what we are to think about the resurrection of Christ.

What caused the rise of the Christian church?

I want to start our investigation by asking, why should we nowadays believe that anything happened at all? One of the answers that you could give to that, I suppose, is to point to the rise and spread of the Christian church. It is the indubitable fact that the Christian church did come into being. If you are a historian, whether atheist or a Christian, that much cannot be doubted; the rise of the Christian church is an indisputable fact of history. And, like all facts of history, we sooner or later must ask what caused the rise of the Christian church.

Now, it is a very interesting thing that the greatest historian of the early church, Luke, who wrote the Gospel named after him and the Acts of the Apostles, tells us in his Gospel that when our Lord Jesus died and was buried the disciples gathered together. It was, 'for fear of the Jews,' says John the Apostle, that they met together with the doors bolted (John 20:19). They were frightened because in those days it was a very dangerous thing to be associated with Jesus Christ, whom the authorities, both Jewish and Roman, had so recently executed.

It was fifty days later that they came out boldly into the streets of Jerusalem and claimed that the nation was guilty of murder in having had Jesus Christ of Nazareth crucified (Acts 2:22-23).

We ask, then, the first question:

What was the spring that catapulted those men on to the stage of world history to begin what we nowadays call the Christian church?

And their answer would be: 'It was the resurrection of Jesus Christ. We thought he was finished. We knew he was buried and we discovered the third day that he had risen from the dead. We met him, touched him and ate with him before he ascended into heaven.'

So the church says that the resurrection is what was at its very root.

But there is a second question to ask:

When these early Christians came out into the streets of Jerusalem and then into the cities of the Roman Empire, what was the message they had to preach?

After all, it's one thing to be catapulted on to the stage of history, but if they were going to survive they had to have a message to preach. What message did they preach?

And here there is a very interesting fact to be observed. If you look carefully at the Acts of the Apostles, which is the historical record of the early days of the church written by Luke himself, a contemporary of these things, you will find that in the whole of his long book of twenty-eight chapters there is virtually nothing whatsoever about Christian morality.

Ask anybody nowadays, what is the heart and essence of Christianity, and you're liable to get the reply, 'Christianity is about loving your neighbour as yourself and doing to others as you would have them do to you.'

So, shall we ask the question, ‘Is that the message the early Christians had to bring to the world?’ Was it that they had become so enamoured of the wonderful moral teaching of Jesus Christ that they thought they must tell everybody, so they went out through Jerusalem at the risk of their lives? They went out to the Roman cities and eventually many of them faced the lions and were crunched to bits in their mouths—all for this: ‘We have a wonderful message for the world: you should love your neighbour as yourself?’ No, indeed not.

Glorious as that moral teaching is, it’s not the heart of Christianity. In fact, the moral lesson, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself’, didn’t originate with Christianity. It was to be found centuries before in the Jewish Old Testament, in the book of Leviticus. It would have been nothing new for them to preach that morality, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself’ (Lev 19:18).

What was the message, then? Read the Acts of the Apostles and you will find this interesting thing; sermon after sermon, speech after speech has at its very heart and kernel this glorious fact: Jesus Christ, Son of God and Messiah, crucified in Jerusalem city and buried—*on the third day he rose from the dead*. Said these early Christians, ‘We are those appointed by God to be witnesses of these things. That is our *raison d’être*, why we were appointed, our total job—to witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ.’ That is what the early Christians say about themselves.

If we were to ask them, ‘What gave you the courage to come out and speak?’

‘The resurrection,’ they would say.

‘And what is the burning message you have to proclaim?’

‘The resurrection!’

Without the resurrection the church had no message

Well, if you can’t believe the resurrection of Christ, now you have a very real problem, as Professor Charlie Moule used to say a decade or two ago.³ You have the Christian church; as good historians you ought to try and account for how it came to be. Where did it spring from and what did it think it was appointed to do?

And if you say to the early church, ‘Well, what’s your message?’

They say, ‘The resurrection of Christ.’

You say, ‘No, that can’t be, because it didn’t happen. So what is your *real* purpose?’

They haven’t got anything to say. And, as Professor Moule used to say, it would leave a very big hole in history unaccounted for.

If I might anticipate what we shall say later, you can understand the Christians, can’t you? They really believed the resurrection; and because they believed it, it lay at the heart of their message. *If the resurrection is true, it carries implications for every man, woman and child under the face of the sun, ever since the world began until the world shall end.*

The body of the Lord Jesus is really human

It is the Christian claim that Jesus Christ, being God, was truly human—his body was a real human body. Their claim is that when that body was put into the grave, dead as dead could

³ C. F. D. Moule (1908–2007). Anglican theologian and New Testament scholar.

be, the normal processes of corruption didn't even begin. And then, presently, three days after, God reversed the process of death and brought the human body of Jesus Christ out of the tomb. And, further, the New Testament claims that after forty days that human body was elevated to God's eternal heaven, a human body still. If that is true, you can understand why the Christians made it the centre of their message, can't you?

Imagine a wily old hard-boiled Greek, and an apostle saying to him, 'I've got wonderful news for you.'

'Oh,' says the Greek, 'what might that be? "Love your neighbour as yourself"? Tell us something new,' the Greek would say. 'We have philosophers as well.'

Ah, but it would have been a different story if the apostle had said, 'Old chap, I have something wonderful to tell you.'

'What might that be?'

'A dead man—as dead as you will be one day—has risen from the dead, the firstfruits of a great harvest yet to come.' (See 1 Cor 15:20.)

Implications for the universe

If the resurrection is true, then it not only has implications for every man, woman and child that has ever lived; it has implications for our whole universe. The chemists tell us that the chemistry of the universe is virtually the same throughout everywhere, and, of course, our bodies are made of chemicals, aren't they? If the human body of Jesus Christ saw no corruption, but on the third day God raised it from the dead, it has implications eventually, as the Bible itself will tell us, for the whole matter of the entire universe.

You say, 'What do you mean by that?'

Well, if you listen to the scientists they will tell you that our universe is running down. And if we enquire what they mean by that, they will say,

'Well, look at our old sun up in the sky, pouring out its millions of tonnes of energy every day. By definition, therefore, getting smaller, running down. One day it will collapse with an almighty explosion. In that moment, planet earth will evaporate. If it goes on like it's going, the sun itself will die. We can see other suns when we turn our telescopes to the universe around us, and we can see other suns die. Our sun will be no exception, if it goes on like it does at the moment.'

We live in a dying universe. It's not only the sun up in the sky that's dying, but, ladies and gentlemen, we are too, aren't we? The medics have unpleasant ways about them! They tell us that after you get to the age of forty your brain cells begin to die at an alarming rate. My friends agree with them, when they look at me. They say, 'Yes, that's obviously true!'

The universe is running down, and all of us have a vested interest in it. If the resurrection is true, you can understand why the Christians put it at the heart of their message. It has implications, not only for individual men and women all the way through history; it has implications for our very universe. And the message would be that God, who made it, is not going to allow the universe to slip gradually into destruction. One day it shall be renewed, and creation shall be 'set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God' (Rom 8:21).

Now I have wandered, forgive me. I was quoting the early church. One of the reasons why we ought to begin to think that something really did happen two thousand years ago in that garden just outside Jerusalem is that we are here on a Sunday night. An interesting fact is that almost all of the early Christians were Jews; they normally worshipped God on the Sabbath day, our Saturday. Suddenly, as if from nowhere, those early Christians, still being Jews and still keeping the Sabbath, started to gather together on the first day of the week. Eventually they called it the 'Lord's day', *kyriake hēmera*, and that is the name for what we call 'Sunday'. It's still the name for Sunday in modern Greek to this very present day.

That raises an interesting question: What made those early Jews start meeting specially on the first day of the week? The answer, of course, is to be found in their belief that it was on the first day of the week that Jesus their Lord rose from the dead. That bit of evidence is still with us, isn't it? Christians still have that habit, as they have had since the very beginning of things.

What is meant by a 'bodily resurrection'?

But now let us just briefly ask, if we need to at this stage, what did the early Christians mean by *resurrection*? Is it true what Professor Bultmann used to say, that this talk of the body coming out of the grave was only a kind of a mythical, figurative expression for their own personal subjective feeling that it was worth carrying on still? Or did they really mean a literal, physical bodily resurrection?

Well, it's quite clear what the early Christians meant. And not only the early Christians but, according to them, it was what Jesus Christ our Lord said himself. The story is that, on the first day of the week the disciples were together in an upper room, the door barred and bolted, when suddenly the Lord Jesus appeared in their midst and they were shaken and terrified. They thought it was a ghost, a spirit. And Jesus said to them, 'Don't be afraid, it is I, myself. A spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see I have. Handle me and see. I'm not a disembodied spirit. It is I, myself.' He asked his apostles to touch him and eventually eat with him, to convince them that he was not just a disembodied spirit that had survived death; he was a risen human being with a human body (see Luke 24:36–43).

And you will see how the early Christians constantly tell you a very interesting fact. They do not merely say that Jesus Christ rose from the dead; they will tell you that Jesus Christ rose from the dead *on the third day*. And why is that important? Well, if it were merely a question that, when he died, his spirit or soul survived, wouldn't the spirit and soul have survived from the very moment his body was put to death? It wouldn't take three days for the spirit to survive. So, when the Christians say he rose again the third day from the dead, it is obvious that they're not talking about the survival of his spirit. They're talking about the resurrection of the body that was in the grave over parts of three days, and on the third day rose from the dead.

It was the same body

At the same time, you will notice that the early Christians are quite clear about this: it was the same body. They report, for instance, an occasion when one of the disciples called Thomas,

who hadn't been there on the first occasion, doubted when they told him that Jesus was risen from the dead. He said, 'Except I put my finger in the print of the nails where he was crucified, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe that he has risen from the dead' (see John 20:25).

The following Sunday Thomas was with the rest of the apostles and Jesus Christ appeared to them again. He said, 'Thomas, bring your finger and put it into the nail print, and thrust your hand into my side' (v. 27). This was evidence that the very same body that had been crucified and buried was now raised from the dead. It had not been replaced and another one put in its place; it was the same body.

Yet it was different

And yet they are equally adamant that, while it was the same body, in another respect it was exceedingly different. For instance, it could suddenly appear. Some history books tell you that our Lord's risen body was of a sort that it could come through doors without opening them. Scripture doesn't say it came through the doors. That's a minor point, isn't it? It suddenly appeared. Ask some astrophysicists nowadays and they will talk to you about different dimensions in the universe. I think, at the last count, they've got up to some eleven different dimensions that are in the universe. Whatever the explanation is, his body was different. It is what the New Testament calls 'a glorified body', but a real body that could still be touched and handled, a body that had flesh and bones.

What is meant by a 'spiritual body'?

But here we must pause for just for a moment to deal with another argument. Some theologians would tell us nowadays that Paul the Apostle held a very different view of the resurrection from people like Luke, Matthew, John and Mark, who tell us that in resurrection the Lord Jesus had a literal body of flesh and bone. These theologians point out that, when Paul writes about the resurrection in his first letter to the Corinthians, he describes the resurrection body as a 'spiritual body' (15:44).

'There you are,' they say. 'Paul disagrees with this stuff in the Gospels. He regards that as a mere legendary addition. His own belief is that the risen body of Christ was a spiritual body. He was a spirit; it was the survival of his human spirit.'

Now, the argument is false, isn't it? Yes, Paul says that the body of Christ and all the resurrection bodies are spiritual bodies; but what does he mean by a 'spiritual body'?

Let me take a humble analogy. If you asked me how my car runs and I said, 'Well, it has a petrol engine', what would you deduce from that? That the engine was made of petrol? Well, no, of course not. If I said, 'I have a car, but it's got an electric motor inside', what would you conclude from that? Would you say, 'The motor must be made of electricity'? Well, of course not. If I say that my car has got a petrol engine, I don't mean the engine is made of petrol, I mean that petrol is the driving force in the engine. You can have engines that are driven by petrol, you can get engines that are driven by diesel, you can have engines that are driven by electricity and you can get engines that are driven by steam.

What Paul is talking about is this. Our earthly bodies, such as we have now, are *soulish* bodies—that is their driving force. The resurrection body is a real resurrection body. Its driving force, however, is not soul, but spirit. Therein is one of its differences; not that it's made of spirit, but its driving principle is spirit.

That, then, as I understand it, is what the Christians are telling us about the resurrection. It is a bodily resurrection: a body, not replaced and another substituted, but a body changed. The same body changed and glorified.

Most people did not believe in bodily resurrection

But here come the objections once more. You say to me, perhaps, 'The early Christians were rather primitive, you know. They were so primitive they didn't understand modern science. They would believe any old thing that anybody told them, and for them it was very easy to believe in the possibility of a bodily resurrection. Everybody in those days would have found it easy to believe in a bodily resurrection. But nowadays we are so sophisticated and scientific we couldn't possibly believe in a bodily resurrection. Not we, today; but the early Christians were primitive.'

I wonder where you got that idea from. It sounds very curious to a classicist like myself, who spent my youth in the luxury of reading the classics and the literature of the times of Christ, and before Christ. I don't know where you got the idea from, if you have it, that people in those days would find it easy to believe in the resurrection of the body. The vast majority wouldn't have believed any such thing!

In Judaism, the Pharisees believed in the resurrection. But the Sadducees (the people largely responsible for putting Jesus Christ to death), with their Old Testament Bible in their hands, downright refused to believe in resurrection of any kind. They were Jews who knew the Old Testament; some of them were the high priests in Jerusalem. They didn't believe in angels and they didn't believe in the survival of the soul or the spirit. They felt when you died you were done for. They certainly didn't believe in the resurrection of anybody, let alone the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It was in the face of that opposition that the Christian apostles went out and preached the resurrection.

The Greeks likewise didn't believe in the possibility of the resurrection of the body. We're told that on Mars Hill Paul was invited to give a lecture to some of the learned Greeks, and among them were Epicureans. They believed in the early form of the atomic theory. The atomic theory is a very ancient theory, and they believed it. They held that when a person dies the atoms of which his body is composed come adrift and can never be collected again. Moreover, they said that the atoms of a man's soul all come to bits and can't be put together again. They didn't believe in the resurrection and when Paul preached the resurrection of Jesus from the dead they laughed. They'd never heard anything so ridiculous. Aeschylus, the great tragic poet of the Greeks, said on one occasion that when man lies down in death there is no resurrection.

When the apostles, therefore, went out to preach the resurrection, they had to preach it against the face of almost one hundred percent unwillingness to believe. Most people believed in the survival of the soul, of course, like the great Plato did. But when they laughed

at Paul in the court of the Areopagus, he didn't stop his lecture and say, 'Look here, don't be so quick to laugh, if you please. All I meant was that, when Jesus Christ was crucified and buried, his soul survived. Don't laugh, Plato preached the same thing.'

No, he didn't say that. *He didn't mean that.* In the face of the opposition, he preached the bodily resurrection of Christ.

Has science proved that resurrection is impossible?

But you say, 'We can't believe it nowadays.'

Why can't you?

'Well,' you say, 'science has proved, hasn't it, that such things are impossible. The resurrection from the dead would be a straight miracle, and hasn't science proved that miracles are impossible?'

Ladies and gentlemen, it is the fact that many scientists say that; but it's not their science that forces them to say so. They say it, not because science has forced them to say that miracles are impossible; they say it because they start off with the assumption that there is no God, that all there is in the universe is matter and, if that is so, miracles are impossible. Therefore, the story of the resurrection can't be true. It's not that science proves it; it's their pre-supposition that there's no God that leads them to conduct their science in such a way as they will tell you science proves the resurrection impossible.

Now, don't just take that from me. I want to read you a recent statement from a scientist. His name is Richard Lewontin,⁴ one of the leading older scientists in the United States. He was a great personal friend of Carl Sagan,⁵ the scientist who made it his speciality to use his radio telescopes to listen into space. He did it in the conviction that there must be intelligent beings on other planets trying to get in touch with us. Both Carl Sagan and Richard Lewontin are atheists (Carl Sagan is now dead).

This is rather difficult language, but I want you to listen to what this atheist scientist says.

Our willingness to accept scientific claims that are against common sense is the key to an understanding of the real struggle between science and the supernatural. We take the side of science *in spite* of the patent absurdity of some of its constructs, *in spite* of its failure to fulfil many of its extravagant promises of health and life, *in spite* of the tolerance of the scientific community for unsubstantiated just-so stories, because we have a prior commitment, a commitment to materialism. It is not that the methods and institutions of science somehow compel us to accept a material explanation of the phenomenal world, but, on the contrary, that we are forced by our *a priori* adherence to material causes to create an apparatus of investigation and a set of concepts that produce material explanations, no matter how counter-intuitive, no matter how mystifying to the uninitiated. Moreover, that materialism is absolute, for we cannot allow a Divine Foot in the door.⁶

⁴ Evolutionary geneticist (born 1929).

⁵ American Astronomer (1934–96).

⁶ From Lewontin's review of Carl Sagan's last book, *Billions and Billions: Thoughts on Life and Death at the Brink of the Millennium*, in the New York Review of Books, 1 July 1997 (italics in original).

If you ever hear scientists saying that science has made it impossible for people to believe in God or the resurrection of Jesus Christ, remember what Professor Lewontin says, as an absolute atheist and a world famous scientist.

‘It’s not science that makes it impossible for us to believe in such things as the resurrection of Christ.’

What is it then?

‘It’s our prior commitment to materialism, and we are determined to maintain that standpoint. We’re not prepared for any God to put his foot inside our door.’

Evidence for God

There is a God, isn’t there? How do we know there’s a God? One of the reasons is that, as the Bible puts it, the evidence is all around us. Everywhere we look there is clear evidence of an intelligence behind the universe and overwhelming evidence of design.

The modern American biochemist Michael Behe⁷ nowadays constantly uses the technical term that he calls *irreducible complexity*. He says that the more you study the cell, the more you see that it is so fantastically complicated that it couldn’t have happened by accident. Moreover, many of the systems within the cell are not only complicated, but all the systems must have been there before any of them would work.

To illustrate his point of what he means by ‘irreducible complexity’, he uses the simple illustration of a mousetrap. You will know very well, I suspect, that a mousetrap is made up of various bits and pieces. There is the wooden base to it, then a hammer thing and a spring. A hook catches the old thing upwards until the mouse treads on the trap and gets smitten by the hammer.

And Professor Behe asks us to ponder the mousetrap for a moment. Would you think that you could start off for a few million years just with a base board and catch a few mice? And millions of years later, add a hammer and catch a few more mice? And then some millions of years later add a spring and catch rather a lot of mice? And finally add the hook and a bit of cheese, and catch all the mice there are? Of course not! You wouldn’t begin to think that, would you? You would say, ‘That’s a foolish man to talk like that.’ Simple thing that it is, if a mousetrap’s going to work, all the parts must be there and functioning together or else you won’t catch any mice. It is irreducibly complex; take one part away and you don’t catch anything.

Professor Behe points to the wonderfully complicated processes within our cells. Fantastically complicated processes, and the point of them is that they are not only complex, but all the bits have to be there working together. If one little bit is missing, the thing stops working and we suffer from disease or even death.

These days, ladies and gentlemen, there is increasing evidence of design and intelligence behind the universe and behind our bodies. And if there’s a God, I say to you what Paul said to King Agrippa, ‘Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?’ (Acts

⁷ Professor of biochemistry at Lehigh University in Pennsylvania and a senior fellow of the Discovery Institute’s Centre for Science and Culture (born 1952).

26:8). If God by his word brought the whole universe into being, how can it be thought incredible that that same God would raise the dead?

What is the point of the resurrection of the body?

We come to a final objection, and that is the objection by the learned former Bishop of Durham. He cannot believe in the resurrection of the body, for what would be the point of raising a dead body from the grave? He can think of the survival of the soul, but what's the point of the resurrection of the body? He says it would be like God performing a conjuring trick with bones.

Here we touch a very profound matter. In the first place, there is the Bible's view of man, and here the Old Testament and the New stand out against many world religions. The Bible says that the human body is not like the wrapping paper around your packet of peas. The peas are the real thing and you take off the wrapper and throw it in the bin. The human body is not that. It's not just a temporary motel where you lodge for the night, but it's not really you. The human body, says the Bible, is an integral part of the human personality. That's a marvellous thing, and I'm sure I'm going to carry you with me in this, if in nothing else.

The great Greek, Socrates, and the philosopher, Plato, held a very different view of the body. They taught that the body is a kind of a tomb, and in Greek they made a play on the words, *sōma* and *sama*: the body, *sōma*, is a *sama*, that is, a tomb. The body is like a tomb or a prison house that keeps the soul imprisoned. And they told people that the proper way, the way of wisdom, is why you are forced to live in the body; you must keep as far away from the body as you can lest the soul be defiled by the body. And when at last the time comes to die, what a happy release; you leave the old body behind and your immortal soul goes back to the realms of eternity. In other words, they despised the body.

Millions of Indians and others who are adherents of Hinduism hold virtually the same thing, don't they? The body is made of matter; it is a very lowly form. It is unfortunate, and the whole point of the wise man is so to live that when at last he dies, he may escape the body and not be obliged to come back into the body ever again. In other words, they decry the body. The body is something demeaning, something you would like to get rid of; and what sad results that can have sometimes.

You'll have heard in this last day or two the story of the people that committed voluntary suicide in San Diego, California. The only explanation available so far is that they regarded their bodies as a kind of a prison house, and they were wanting to set their souls free from the human body and go and join some terrestrial starlight body that was following a comet or something. And so, because they despised the human body, they cut themselves adrift from it.

That is not Christianity. Christianity teaches the value, the wholesomeness, the goodness of the human body made by God himself; a delightful thing, yet spoiled by sin and, therefore, on its way to corruption and to death. But because of the redeeming work of Christ the body itself one day is to be redeemed and transformed to be like our Lord's glorious body (Phil 3:21).

God's Son took upon himself a human body

And what is more, so far from the resurrection of the body being a conjuring trick with bones, unworthy of God's attention, the story of the body of Christ lies at the very heart of the Christian gospel, does it not? When God set himself to save us fallen human beings, he didn't remain in his high and lofty heaven. God is spirit; he didn't remain simply like that, but sent forth his Son who, being God and never ceasing to be God, took upon himself a human body.

He took it, not just as a temporary motel in which he might live for a few years and then discard it as irrelevant; he took a human body because a human body is an integral part of a human personality, and for our salvation it meant that he would become truly human like we are. His body was sinless, but listen to what the gospel says: 'He himself bore our sins *in his body* on the tree' (1 Pet 2:24). He took upon himself the death we deserved, the penalty and judgment under a holy God for our sin as human beings. 'Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures'—he was really dead, 'he was buried, but he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures' (see again 1 Cor 15:3–4).

The significance of it is glorious indeed. Take the first thing: The Bible says that Jesus Christ was delivered over to death for our trespasses, dying the just for the unjust, bearing in his sinless body our sins, paying the penalty (see 1 Pet 3:18).

But he was raised the third day by God for our justification (Rom 4:25). In raising the body of Jesus Christ, God was saying, 'It's this same Jesus that stood before the cross as the representative of all mankind, truly human and therefore with a human body.' He went to the cross to bear our sins in his body and bear the judgment of God against our sin.

'And now,' says God, 'that judgment is past, the penalty has been paid. And the guarantee and demonstration of it is this, that holy body is raised again from the dead.' It's glorious, isn't it? And Jesus Christ is raised, not as a disembodied spirit, but as a man still: a man who for our sakes died at Calvary, but has been raised as our representative man and received up into glory (1 Tim 3:16).

Our redeemed bodies shall be like his glorious body

The other part of the gospel is this, that one day all who trust him shall have a redeemed body, a body transformed to be like our Lord's glorious body (Phil 3:21). This is not half a salvation; it's God giving the whole of Christ, body, soul and spirit, for the whole of man, body, soul and spirit. When God's redemption is finished, it shall not be a collection of disembodied spirits that God will have in heaven; it is a collection of whole men and women, spirits, souls and bodies, redeemed by Christ. A whole Christ for the whole human being.

Judgment is committed to the Son of Man

And finally, the bodily resurrection of Jesus proclaims him to be God's Son, and is the evidence of a coming judgment. One day, because he is truly human and remains truly human, and because he is the Son of Man, all judgment shall be committed to him. The day will come when he shall speak the word and 'those that are in the tombs shall hear his voice, and come out, those that have done good to the resurrection of life, and those that have done evil to the resurrection of judgment' (see John 5:25–29). That is the Christian gospel.

The wonderful thing, perhaps, for us is this. The risen Son of God tells us not merely that one day he will call the physically dead out of their graves to stand before his judgment throne; but the risen Son of God tells us that, even now, he longs to give us the gift of eternal life; imperishable, incorruptible, eternal life. 'An hour is coming,' said he, 'and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live' (v. 25).

The bodily return of Christ

Which brings us now to the end of the lecture, and to this marvellous fact: Jesus Christ not only rose again the third day according to the Scriptures, not only ascended to God's right hand, but is alive still. The resurrection is not something that simply happened two thousand years ago, and that was the end of it. The resurrection was a beginning. Jesus Christ is no older today than he was two thousand years ago, but in the eternity where he now is age doesn't apply. Jesus Christ lives, and therefore he lives for each one of us, longing that we hear his voice, offering us here in our dying world the gift of new life; a new life that is now at this moment a spiritual life. He offers us now forgiveness, fellowship with God, the very life of God, our Father, in preparation for the day when he shall come again and the dead in Christ shall rise first, and we that are alive and remain (those that have trusted the Saviour) shall all be caught up to meet the Lord in the air, and we shall be changed (1 Thess 4:16-17; 1 Cor 15:51-52).

That, ladies and gentlemen, is what I understand the Bible to be saying when it talks to us of the empty tomb and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And that, as I understand it, is the relevance of his resurrection for us today. Because that is so, allow me, before we leave, to speak to Jesus Christ in prayer. Shall we pray.

Lord Jesus Christ, the Bible says that thou art risen from the dead and we believe it. We thank thee for everyone who down the ages has discovered thee as being the living Lord. We thank thee for the bright prospect that one day thou will bodily return, and the whole universe shall be delivered from her bondage to corruption into the liberty of the children of God.

And now, in these moments, we turn to talk to thee personally. Because thou art the living Christ thou art near us and can read our hearts and thoughts. Cause us, we pray, each one, to hear thy living, creative word in our hearts; to hear thy voice, and hearing to believe; and believing, receive thy gift of eternal life which thou hast promised to all who accept thee. For thy name's sake, Amen.

About the Author

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