

THE RESURRECTION

Some things *demand* an explanation. Think of all the incidents which confront us daily which call for investigation and explanation. A broken window; the key won't turn in the lock; no water will come out of the tap; a tyre on the car is losing pressure; an employee hasn't turned up for work; the cooker in the kitchen won't heat up, etc. etc. Doctors in their surgeries are bombarded each day with symptoms and questions from frightened patients requiring explanations — one is losing weight; one is unable to breathe properly; one is losing the sight in one eye; one is passing blood; one has an alarming rash, and so on. The police are no strangers to situations requiring an explanation. They deal each hour with bizarre events and mysterious goings-on which all have an explanation, if it can be found. Perhaps the most serious situation is when a dead body is found — such a thing certainly requires an explanation. When was the person last seen alive and how did they die? Has a murder been committed? A blood-stained knife is found nearby and serious wounds are visible on the body. Enquiries and a search is made, witnesses are interviewed, clues and fingerprints are sought. Once foul play is confirmed the police move on to identify the suspects; consider the motives and ponder the opportunities. *No one actually saw* what took place but the facts testify to what must have happened. The police and the lawyers try to discover the most likely explanation from the facts.

Deductions must be intelligently made. Someone who was alive and is now dead is a circumstance which demands an explanation. We are no strangers to such situations. Jesus' empty tomb equally demands an explanation. Someone who was quite dead and is now certainly alive is surely a matter which requires an explanation. Jesus was murdered but threw the dead process into reverse.

Jesus is unique in having risen immortal from the dead. No one *actually saw* Jesus emerge from the tomb but certain facts require an explanation. Deductions *must* be drawn from the facts and must account for *The Predictions; The Death; The burial; The empty Tomb; the Appearances* and *The Impact*.

THE PREDICTIONS — Apart from the Old Testament predictions that Jesus would be redeemed from the power of the grave and that His soul would not be left to Sheol, or see corruption (Ps.16:10; 71:20; Ho. 13:14), Jesus Himself predicted long before His death that He would rise again from the grave. His predictions may have fallen on deaf ears as far as His disciples were concerned but Jesus made these predictions regularly. "From that time forth began Jesus to show unto His

disciples, how that He must go up to Jerusalem, and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised again the third day (Matt. 20:19). A few chapters later Jesus informed His disciples that *after He had risen* He would go before them into Galilee. When He came down from the mount of transfiguration with Peter, James and John He told them not to say a word of what they had seen "until He had risen again from the dead." He also challenged the Jewish leaders with the assertion, "Destroy this temple (His body) and in three days I will raise it up." These many predictions are most worthy of mention because they illustrate that Jesus had every confidence that He would conquer death and the grave (a confidence apparently not shared by His disciples) and that the resurrection was not therefore a clever but hasty stage-managed fraud perpetrated by His disciples (as is alleged by sceptics and Higher Criticism). To rise from the dead the third day after burial is an achievement defying description — to have *predicted it* many times beforehand multiplies the marvel a hundred times.

THE DEATH — I understand that few sceptics nowadays attempt to deny that Jesus was certainly dead prior to being laid in the tomb. At one time it was argued that Jesus was but unconscious when He was interred and the spices and coolness of the tomb brought Him out of His 'swoon.'

It was never explained, however, how He got out of the tomb and how he moved the 'exceedingly great' stone which blocked the tomb entrance, especially without any blood in His veins. The Roman soldiers may have been rough but they were also known to be efficient and when instructed by Pilate (at the request of the Jews) to hasten the deaths of those on the three crosses by breaking their legs, we read that they broke the legs of the other two but did not break the legs of Jesus because He was '*dead already.*'

THE BURIAL — Joseph of Arimathaea and Nicodemus wound the dead body of Jesus in linen clothes, with spices, and buried it in the manner of the Jews in a tomb hewn from the rock and rolled a 'very great' stone against the entrance. The disciples of Jesus may have forgotten the forecast of Jesus that He would rise the third day but *the enemies* of Jesus remembered it and took it more seriously. They were alive to the danger that the disciples could easily remove the body of Jesus from the tomb and claim a resurrection. They therefore set in motion several precautions to make sure that this could not be done, and in all the measures they took they unwittingly created a situation which served later to provide unassailable proof of the resurrection.

Truely God works in mysterious ways His wonders to perform. The chief Priests and Pharisees went to Pilate and explained their fears saying, "Sir we remember that that deceiver said *while He was yet alive* (They believed He was dead), after three days I will rise again. Command therefore that the sepulchre be made sure, until the third day; lest his disciples come by night, and steal him away; and say unto the people, He is risen from the dead. So the last error shall be worse than the first. Pilate said unto them, Ye have a watch: Go your way: make sure it as sure as you can. So they went, and *made the sepulchre sure*: sealing the stone and setting a watch." The only way for Jesus to emerge was by moving the stone so the Jews sealed the stone and placed a guard. It was now quite impossible for the disciples to take the body without detection. The first line of defence was the seal of the stone; the second was the guard. Had the Jews not taken such elaborate precautions they could, at a later date, have accused the disciples of having stolen the body. By making the sepulchre 'sure' (or lockfast, or thiefproof) the Jews unintentionally, and to their later chagrin, succeeded only in highlighting the fact of the resurrection.

THE EMPTY TOMB — Jesus had assured His disciples many times that although He would suffer many things in Jerusalem at the hands of the Jewish

elders and Chief Priests, and ultimately be killed, yet He would emerge from the tomb on the third day. We might expect, therefore, that these same disciples would have all congregated at the tomb on the third day to watch Jesus break out of the sepulchre. *Not so*, nor did it seem that the disciples had even the haziest notion of trying to steal the body.

Indeed when the few women who first discovered the empty tomb, and had seen the Lord, ran back to tell the disciples, they 'believed not' and "Their words seemed to them as idle tales, and they believed them not." The empty tomb was, therefore, to the disciples, *a complete surprise*. To the enemies of Jesus, the empty tomb was *a frightening embarrassment* — frightening because it called for an explanation (indeed a public explanation) and the true explanation could only be that Jesus had risen from the dead. However Public Relations men in every age can work wonders with a few lies and a few 'handouts.' Thus the guards who had been watching over the tomb (and who had understandably quaked and fainted 'like dead men' when they saw the angel, and earthquake) had to be bribed 'with large sums of money' to say that they had slept on duty and the disciples had, as feared, stolen the body. Thus *the explanation of the empty tomb* was clear to the Jewish elders and Pharisees (if to no one else); i.e. that Jesus had, as He had predicted, risen from the grave on the third day.

THE APPEARANCES — those sceptics who still feel that they can explain the empty tomb have now to come with the appearances. It is difficult to take seriously the usual explanation offered by those who doubt the resurrection, that those who saw Jesus after his death suffered from delusions or hallucinations. When we recall the many appearances Jesus made (over a period of 6 weeks), even to five hundred brethren simultaneously, one hesitates to believe that all suffered from hallucinations. Indeed when Jesus appeared to the disciples and Thomas He invited Thomas to thrust his hand into the wound in Jesus' side to prove there was no apparition. Jesus also called for food that in the eating thereof He might assure all that He was no 'spook' or spirit. The appearances of Jesus (bodily) not only indicate the completion of Christ's redemptive work but also shed some light on the *nature* of that redemption, i.e. the inclusion of man's body in the scheme of salvation or, as Paul puts it, "the adoption, to wit, the redemption of the body." (Rom. 8:23). The whole transaction of the resurrection centred around the tomb because that's where the body was. The only kind of resurrection is a *bodily resurrection*, hence the necessity for Jesus to show Himself alive with many (infallible) proofs and essentially to show his re-animated body. His appearances can not therefore be explained other than by conceding His resurrection.

THE IMPACT — Two thousand years later the impact is still reverberating around the world. Perhaps the most compelling evidence of the resurrection, apart from the empty tomb and the personal appearances, is the transformation of the Lord's disciples. After Christ's death the disciples were numb with depression and disappointment. Had they not watched Him die and heard his awful death-cry, "Why hast thou forsaken Me." They were like soldiers of a defeated army; disconsolate and in hiding, wondering perhaps how they might pick up the threads of their former lives again, and start looking for jobs.

Then came the transformation, when they 'had seen the Lord.' Their weakness is supplanted with courage; their depression with confidence; their sorrow with joy, which no future tribulation would ever diminish. Their abandoned interest was now replaced by a boundless and consuming zeal, ever prepared to die a martyr's death. To those who say the resurrection is a legend or folk-lore it should be evident that a legend takes many, many years to mature but the transformation of the disciples was immediate. Within a few weeks, Peter, who had denied the Lord,

was preaching the resurrection, in spite of all threats against him, within a stones throw of the tomb and scene of the crucifixion. "Therefore, let all the House of Israel know assuredly that God hath this same Jesus whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ ... whom God hath raised up, having loosened the pains of death; because it was not possible that He should be holden of it ..." This was the theme and bedrock of every gospel discourse proclaimed in Jerusalem to those who had condemned Jesus, those who had seen Him die and perhaps even to the guards sent to guard the grave. Those in authority, the elders and Pharisees, fumed, threatened and even beat the disciples for preaching the message but never, it seems, thought it feasible *to deny* the resurrection. Even some 30 years later, Paul said that most of the 500 witnesses to the Lord's resurrection were still alive and could be cross-examined. The *silence* of the Jews is therefore more eloquent testimony than the preaching of the apostles. After all, the Jews could have quickly silenced the preachers by going to the tomb and bringing out the body, and they would dearly have loved to have been able to do so, but they could not because, in the words of the angel, "He is risen, He is not here."

Everyone who sees the light of day requires, sometime or other in their lives to produce an explanation of the events surrounding the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. The only true explanation is that Jesus, as He had often predicted, "suffered many things of the elders and chief priests, and was killed, and was raised again the third day." His resurrection (like the sign of the prophet Jonas) is the only sign God gives to an evil and adulterous generation. The founders of other religions have beautiful and well-tended graves but Christians can but point to the empty tomb. This measures the difference between Jesus and all others.

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