

## Easter Reflection

What Easter means, truly means will be something that we will wrestle with for the remainder of our years. It is something that the earliest Christian communities grappled with only perhaps with more vigour and inquisitiveness than we do today.

As Tom Wright points out, we seem to classify pre Darwinian pre Newtonian civilisations as fundamentally superstitious. Subsequently we feel tempted to bat away many of the societal norms that they held and see it in the cold light of the post enlightenment world. Yet we know that they knew as we do now that once somebody is dead, they do not come back.

The afterlife was conceptualised by other systems of understanding as some ‘shadow land’, so wreathed in darkness that little could be affirmed of it. An interesting glimpse occurs in Homers Odyssey when the hero of the tale Odysseus, descends to the underworld and there meets his former comrade Achilles, who woefully declares ‘It is better to be a slave in the land of the living than to be king of the dead’. Whilst the utility of Greek paganism on Easter Sunday is understandably questioned the point resounds with the scriptures from our Jewish inheritance.

Psalm 30 *“What is gained if I am silenced, if I go down to the pit? Will the dust praise you? Will it proclaim your faithfulness?”* Indeed the words of our Lord rise up to affirm this point Mark 12 *“He is not a God of the dead but of the living”*.

The existence of God has never been doubted by these various civilisations but a conception of heaven close to what we hold is something that is not found even within the Jewish scriptures. There is a broadly speaking Jewish understanding that life may continue after death but little could be said of it and what could be said made it quite clear that it is not particularly a habitation that is to be desired or anticipated in any way.

Within this cultural and varied understanding of God and the dead, the Resurrection of Jesus Christ emerges. Unlike Homers Odyssey and other founding mythologies we know that the life and death of Jesus happened in history. That is to say we can talk confidently about dates and events and see the events of the New Testament within their actual historical context. The life of Jesus is known to us not just through the four independent Gospels, the writings of Paul but also in contemporary Roman and Jewish accounts. We have as much evidence for the existence of Jesus as we do a figure like Cleopatra. The fact we have equal evidence for the life of a first century Jewish peasant over powerful Ancient monarchs is interesting of itself but of course on Easter Sunday we have more that we want to say and offer.

Firstly, we might be surprised to know that Israel at the time of Jesus was a hotbed for Messianic claimants. A hundred years either side of Jesus’ life there were a number of people who claimed to be the anointed one. Each of these we can historically assert ended with the death of their founder by the prevailing authority of that time and the movement was ended upon that death. We see the very same process begin to take shape around the events of Good Friday, the disciples have abandoned Jesus with only his mother and a few devoted women brave enough to stay by him during his torture and execution. Despite Jesus’ referral

to the Son of Man being raised there was clearly from the sources zero expectation that this would unfold. Whatever drew the disciples to Jesus in the first place was not strong enough for them to stick around once the execution was to take place. This would follow the pattern of the many ‘messiahs’ that came before Jesus and the ones that would follow him. If such movements sought to survive they would pin their hopes on any potential relative that the founding figure might have and project the special status on them, We see this with the Hasmoneans and perhaps also in Islam with the struggle for a caliph after the death of Muhammad. This does not unfold after the death of Jesus. We know that Jesus had a brother named James who was the first bishop of Jerusalem. We know James was martyred for his faith in his brother in 62 AD. James, Paul, Peter or Mary never claimed to be the new figure around whom this community could rally around, even after Jesus’ death the movement still asserted the living authority of Jesus over his Church.

So lets be sceptical, it is a good thing for us to be. So what do we know as undisputed if we focus on Holy week. What we know is this that a man named Jesus was crucified before the Passover for blasphemy and challenging the authority of Rome. Shortly after this event the tomb in which Jesus was placed was empty and further, people who would stack up as reliable and learned by our own standards assert that they have encountered Jesus despite the order of events that I have just outlined.

So lets be sceptical what could have happened and seriously engage with these as objectively as you can, but also read the italics that seek to rebut the claims of the sceptic:

1. Jesus didn’t really die...

*The cross killed – Many resurrection body accounts – giving away of a tomb -*

2. The body was stolen by his disciples

*Disciples were implicit in a lie yet all went to their death in his name– where would they put it?*

3. The body was stolen by the Jews

*They wanted him in the tomb and dead – Ritual defilement for Passover*

4. Romans stole the body

*Wasn’t enough of a threat – They wanted peace*

5. Mass hallucinations

*Bodily appearances – too many witnesses for it to be chance- in 1 Corinthians he appeared to 500 at once*

6. The early Church made it up

*Combines elements of all above – early church was divided on many things, the resurrection was not one of them.*

James Mcdowell wrote a book called ‘Evidence That Demands a Verdict and More Than a Carpenter’. In it he presents 22 reasons for us to hold the door open to the assertion of the early Church.

1. Jesus predicted his own resurrection  
*John 10:17-18 he plainly said he had the power to lay down his own life and then to take it back up again.*
2. Jesus really did die  
*Saying Romans couldn't kill is like saying Paul McCartney can't write a song. Evidence is clear.*
3. Women saw him first  
*If you are inventing a story you don't have a woman witnessing him alive again. Their testimony worth half of a males.*
4. None of the disciples believed Mary  
*Once again incredulity in the face of news we all would reject.*
5. The stone was moved  
*The stone was sealed by Roman seals only removed by permission of the Governor. Stone said to be flung open not simply rolled away. The size and weight of this makes it impossible for a one man job. It was guarded furthermore.*
6. Linen wrappings found folded in place.  
*The linen wrappings would have held structure because of the oils and spices used in burials. Grave robbers take entire body like in Egypt.*
7. No body was reported to be found, even fraudulent claims  
*Macabre note but body disposal requires some forethought and technology but this was not claimed by anybody.*
8. Appearance too many people  
*1 Corinthians says many who saw Jesus are in his day still alive and testify to this.*
9. Jesus seems to eat with his disciples  
*Ghosts don't eat.*
10. All disciples completely transformed and died painful deaths on this very issue  
*Roman world relatively tolerant to faiths yet they died asserting the resurrection, would you die for a lie?*

No one can actually come to faith based on these observations alone but you have to take these arguments seriously. One can look at it in its entirety and conclude that the resurrection didn't happen but there must be another explanation out there that accounts for this phenomenon.

What it really depends upon is who one views the world.

If your world view has no space for a loving creator God then of course there will be limited or no space for the resurrection of Jesus. Yet if your world view does allow for the notion of a loving creator involved in some way of sorting out this flawed and suffering reality then there is space. If your world view is not favourable then you must conclude that some unknown factor accounts for the empty tomb. If you have the world view that permits God to be God then we are still confronted with an argument that pushes what we know to be beyond what we can expect and interpret. Even with the acceptance of God and his loving

providence the question of the resurrection of Jesus will still push us because we are not simply recalling the power over death that God has claimed for Himself through the Son but also the life after death of every single person that we have loved and lost in our earthly lives. The Resurrection of Jesus is the resurrection of our mothers and fathers, wives and husbands, children and friends.

We are right to be sceptical; we know we have nothing within our power to bring about this resurrection but if we take Jesus' words seriously then we know that all things are possible with God.

Review the arguments, make space for others whose world views does not align with yours, be confident in your independent conclusions.

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

God bless you all this Easter time.