

The Resurrection of Christ And the Rise of Christianity

by Fr. Steven C. Kostoff

Orthodox Christians believe that the New Testament Church and the Christian faith itself appeared at a particular point in history because the crucified Jesus of Nazareth was raised from the dead. The cause behind the emergence of the Church and the Christian Faith was not a crucified, dead and buried Jesus. Rather, that very crucified, dead and buried Jesus was revealed to be both Lord and Christ following His Resurrection “on the third day.” God vindicated the messianic claims of Jesus when He raised Jesus from the dead “according to the Scriptures.” Contemporary Orthodox Christians readily agree with the Apostle Paul’s insistence on the absolute centrality of the bodily resurrection of Christ as the foundation of Christian faith in Jesus: “If Christ is not raised, then your faith is in vain and our preaching is in vain.” (I COR. 15) Among all Christians this has been an overwhelming consensus since the initial witness of the apostles to the Risen Lord. But since the emergence of critical biblical scholarship within the last two centuries or so, we find Christian scholars and those influenced by them questioning, reinterpreting or openly denying the bodily resurrection of Jesus. This process may be more accelerated today, or simply more prominent and public in its expression. A vivid – if not lurid - expression of this skeptical approach to the resurrection claims of the first Christians can be found in the work of the New Testament scholar Dom Dominic Crossan. In his reconstruction of events, the body of the crucified Jesus was discarded in a shallow grave, there to suffer the further humiliation of becoming the food of ravenous dogs. That is also the kind of counter-claim that will attract a good deal of publicity. This threatens to undermine a consistent and long-standing witness among all Christians that points to the uniqueness of Jesus Christ among the great “religious founders” within human history. That uniqueness was articulated by Prof. Veselin Kesich in the following manner in his book *The First Day of the New Creation*:

For the members of the first Christian community in Jerusalem, the resurrection of Christ was above all an event in the life of their Master, and then also in their own lives. After meeting Christ following his resurrection, they could have said with St. Paul that necessity was laid upon them to preach the gospel of resurrection (I COR. 9:16). Christianity spread throughout the Greco-Roman world with the proclamation that Jesus who died on the cross was raised to a new life by God. The message of Christianity is without parallel in religious history in its content and in its demand. (p. 15)

The Risen Christ spoke to His disciples about “belief” in His Resurrection even among those who did not “see” Him as those very first disciples did. This was in response to the Apostle Thomas’ movement from unbelief to belief when Jesus appeared to Thomas and offered him to probe the wounds in His hands and side: “You have believed because you have seen me. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believed.” (JN. 20:29) Clearly, the presence of

faith is essential in confessing that Jesus has been raised from the dead: “If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.” (ROM. 10:9) However, in perhaps challenging a misconceived understanding of faith, this does not mean that believing that Jesus was bodily raised from the dead is an irrational leap into the unbelievable and indefensible. On the one hand, the Resurrection is an overwhelming and awesome event that invokes “trembling and astonishment” in those who are presented with its reality – and perhaps initial silence because of its numinous quality (cf. MK. 16:8). On the other hand, Christians do not believe in the resurrection of Christ in the face of evidence that clearly contradicts or “disproves” that claim. It is not as if the first disciples of Jesus were confronted with His (rotting) corpse in the tomb, but then said: “Nevertheless, we still believe that He is risen!” The resurrection of Christ is not about the fate of the “immortal soul” of Jesus, which is quite irrelevant to the Christian claim that death has been overcome in the resurrected Christ. Resurrection is the claim that the body – and thus the whole person conceived biblically – has been raised and glorified to a new mode of existence in an eternal relationship with God. What many Jews believed would occur at the *end* of history, happened with Jesus *within* history. And that is why the Apostle Paul called Christ “the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep.” (I COR. 15:20).

So, while we “see” the Risen Lord through the eyes of faith, we also claim that the historical investigation into the reliability of the evidence for the resurrection, narrated and developed in the New Testament, cannot refute that belief in any way. In Christianity, there exists a mutual interpenetration between theology and history. Thus, theology and history remain in an unbreakable bond of mutual support and clarification. Basically, Christians cannot make theological claims that are historically untenable or refutable. This is due to the foundational claim that God acts decisively on behalf of humankind and the world within the historical space and time of our created world. With this in mind, we can say that there are three essential components to the New Testament’s proclamation of the resurrection of Jesus Christ that together present a reasonable defense of that claim that is simultaneously consistent, coherent and convincing: 1) the discovery of the empty tomb; 2) the appearances of the Risen Lord to His male and female disciples; and 3) the transformation of the disciples into the apostles who boldly proclaim the Risen Christ to the world, and the beginning of the New Testament Church.

The Empty Tomb - Christians do not believe in the empty tomb. Yet Christians believe that the tomb of Jesus must have been empty for them to convincingly announce His resurrection from the dead. The empty tomb in itself simply revealed the fact that something happened to the body of the crucified Jesus. The empty tomb needed to be interpreted. Not expecting the resurrection of her Master, Mary Magdalene’s first reaction was to seek a “natural” interpretation for the empty tomb: “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” (JN. 20:2) That the tomb of the dead Jesus was found empty on the “first day of the week,” following His crucifixion and burial, is now universally acknowledged as a sound historical fact. Even scholars who do not believe in the resurrection of Christ accept the account of the burial of Jesus and the discovery of the empty tomb. The former Roman Catholic and Jesus scholar, Geza Vermes, offers a good example of this basic consensus:

When every argument has been considered and weighed, the only conclusion acceptable to the historian must be that the opinions of the orthodox, liberal sympathizer and the critical agnostic alike – and even perhaps of the disciples themselves – are simply interpretations of the one disconcerting fact: namely that the women who set out to pay their last respects to Jesus found to their consternation, not a body, but an empty tomb.

And, of course, no one has ever claimed to have produced the corpse of Jesus. Whatever one may make of St. Matthew's account in 27:62-66, it is clear that the Jewish propaganda concerning *why* the tomb of Jesus was discovered to be empty, presupposes the acceptance of the empty tomb in the first place. The counter-claim of the Jewish authorities – the “stolen” body of Jesus – was another appeal to a “natural” reason as to why the tomb was empty. But the appearance of the angel(s) within the tomb, recorded by all four evangelists, begins to point well beyond these natural explanations into the mysterious realm of God. For it is God Who acted in both an unexpected and also shatteringly decisive way by transforming the tomb into a womb from which emerges new and everlasting life.

It was the women disciples of Jesus who first heard the Gospel of new life from within the tomb. As prominent New Testaments scholars such as Raymond Brown, N.T. Wright, and William Lane Craig further point out, the discovery of the tomb by a group of women – the holy myrrhbearers – is a very convincing piece of evidence for the veracity of the canonical Gospels' account of the initial discovery of the empty tomb. This is because the witness of women was not binding according to the Law in first century Judaism. The early Church would not have imaginatively given the privilege of discovering the empty tomb to witnesses who unfortunately were thought to be unreliable. In fact, according to LK. 24:11, the apostles initially thought that their words were “an idle tale.” (Did the apostles ever get anything right until they saw the Risen Lord and began to believe in Him?). With the kerygmatic proclamation of the angel from within the tomb, we are introduced into the Good News which has changed the world once and for all: “Do not be amazed; you seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen, he is not here; see the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him, as he told you.” (MK. 16:6-7) This sets the stage for the appearances of the Risen Christ to His disciples.

The Appearances of the Risen Lord - The appearances of the Risen Christ provide the needed interpretation to the empty tomb. The tomb is indeed empty because Jesus has been raised from the dead as the angel proclaimed! This is the dawn of the “new creation” and the “death of death.” Each Gospel ends with at least one chapter (there are two in St. John) narrating one or more appearances of the Risen Lord to His female and male disciples. These appearances initially overwhelmed the disciples and we hear of different reactions: “gladness” (JN. 20:20), “worship” and even “doubt” (MATT. 28:17). In a marvelous expression in St. Luke's Gospel, we even hear that the disciples “disbelieved for joy!” (LK. 24: 41). There is also an initial non-recognition in some accounts (LK. 24:16; JN. 20:14). The sheer unexpectedness of the crucified,

but now risen Lord, appearing to His disciples must account for some of these various reactions. Yet, regardless of these initial reactions, the disciples are completely convinced that it is Jesus raised to new life and now in their midst as their "Lord and God" (JN. 20:28). From our vantage point today, it is virtually impossible for us to comprehend this experience of the first disciples of Christ. The resurrection of Christ was (and remains) a mysterious, unprecedented and eschatological event. Perhaps this is what accounts for the lack of that narrative flow and continuity that we encounter in the narrative of the suffering, death and burial of Christ. The evangelists were hard-pressed to relate "the unrelatable" within the confines of our human language and images. At times, it seems as if language itself breaks down in its struggle to narrate the events of the appearances of Christ.

For we discover in the Risen Lord both "continuity" and "discontinuity." It is the crucified, dead and buried Jesus Himself who is raised from the dead ("You seek Jesus of Nazareth"), a fact born out by His still visible wounds (JN. 20:20, 27); and that He even takes food together with His disciples (LK. 24:42). Yet, there is a great deal of transformation in the Risen Lord: He appears and disappears at will; and closed doors are not obstacles to those appearances (JN. 20:19, 26; LK. 24:31). St. Mark even informs us that He appeared "in another form" (MK. 16:12). When we take into account the complementary aspects of continuity and discontinuity revealed in the Risen Lord, then to speak of His "physical" resurrection can be misleading and open to skeptical dismissal. This is because a "physical" resurrection can be misconstrued as a "mere" resuscitation – and hence resumption - of earthly existence as we experience it in the here and now of this world. And that was the case when Jesus raised to life the daughter of Jairus, the son of the widow of Cain, and his dear friend Lazarus. They all died again, after being brought back to life by the restorative power of Christ. The Lord, however, was *resurrected* to undying and eternal life: "For we know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him." (ROM. 6:9) For this reason, it is much more biblically sound to speak of the "bodily" resurrection of Christ, so as to maintain the essential distinction between resurrection on the one hand, and mere resuscitation on the other, that may be attached to the term "physical." The term "bodily" will also serve to strengthen the reality of transformation that occurs in the resurrection, for the Lord is raised from death in a "spiritual body" according to the theologically-nuanced expression of the Apostle Paul, wonderfully described in I COR. 15:42-50. Raised to life in a spiritual body, the Risen Lord reveals to us the glorified life of the Age to Come. In theological language, we refer to this as an "eschatological reality." (This means an event reserved for the end of history being disclosed within history). And by grace, we will share this with the Lord in "the life of the world to come." What is being stressed here, however, is that the disciples know that it is Jesus once they see Him following His resurrection. This is all summed up by St. Luke in the second volume of his narrative history of Christ's ministry and the beginning of the Church's existence: "To them he presented himself alive after his passion by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days, and speaking of the kingdom of God" (ACTS. 1:3).

The Transformation of the Disciples and the Beginning of the New Testament Church – Something has to account for the evident transformation of Christ's disciples. They are por-

trayed in the Gospels in a painfully unflattering manner, based not only on their obtuseness during the ministry of Christ, but also on their cowardly failing to remain with Him in the hour of His suffering and death. They literally abandoned their Master, and Peter openly denied even knowing Him. But in a very short span of time, those very disciples were transformed into apostles who would carry the Gospel to the “ends of the earth.” At the very heart of that Gospel was that Jesus had overcome death itself by His resurrection, thus inaugurating a new creation and the promise of eternal life with God: “But God raised him up, having loosed the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it” (ACTS. 2:24). Crushed by the brutal and “cursed” death of their Master, and together with Him of their hope that Jesus was the Messiah; fearful and hiding behind closed doors for “fear of the Jews” (JN. 20:19); the messianic movement centered in Jesus was as dead as He apparently was lying in the tomb. A crucified, dead and buried Messiah was not only meaningless, but completely incoherent from the Jewish perspective. Something of great significance must have happened to make any sense of the disciples’ newfound faith, boldness and, finally, willingness to give their own lives for what they would proclaim to the world. Conspiracies and/or collective hallucinations are inept explanations that are now treated as more or less eccentric theories. (Most of these “theories” cancel each other out, so one is left with one choice or another).

In their desire to maintain objectivity, but to also make some sense of the evidence provided to them, historians and scholars must face this historically unprecedented and baffling mystery of the origins of the Christian movement. For all of the “data” tells us that this movement should never have even started! When they carefully examine the evidence and try and come to some conclusions as to the foundational cause of this new faith centered in Jesus of Nazareth – a condemned criminal put to death by the authority of the Roman Empire in the relatively remote and insignificant area of first century Judea – these very historians and scholars must provide a convincing alternative theory if they are not willing to accept the claim that Jesus was raised from the dead. A fair question then forms itself naturally: taking into account the beliefs of first century Judaism concerning the possibility of a crucified Messiah, issues of “life after death,” and the Jewish belief in the resurrection from the dead at the end of time; just how convincing are any of those alternative theories? Perhaps that is why some major New Testament scholars, such as E.P. Sanders, without committing themselves to an active faith in the resurrection of Christ, are at least conceding that the disciples of Christ were convinced that they saw Him alive following His death on the cross. And that they then acted on that conviction.

To return to an initial point, I do not believe that Christians should attempt to compel faith in Christ by a careful gathering of the evidence concerning Christ’s resurrection from the dead. This is not a courtroom trial. And Christian faith is not based upon the “jury’s” verdict. A commitment to Christ as the Crucified and Risen One who has “trampled down death by death and upon those in the tombs bestowing life,” begins with faith, based on trusting the witness of the apostles of Christ. *A witness that they were prepared to die for.* This trust slowly begins to transform each Christian so that that faith is a living and personal faith. As that faith matures, all Christians may reach a point when they can make their own the words of the Apostle Paul: “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the

life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (GAL. 2:20). Yet, the Christian claim is that God acts within human history. That God enters into the time and space of our world to create, sustain and redeem us as the Lord of history Who has prepared a glorious future for us. The ultimate manifestation of that divine activity within the world is revealed in the Incarnation of the eternal Son of God. And His death and resurrection from the dead fulfills the promises of God as He remains faithful to His faithless people throughout history. This historical aspect of our Christian faith means, to repeat this again, that any historical evidence that can disprove the resurrection of Christ would immediately and definitively undermine that faith. But no such evidence exists. On the contrary, it points us toward the genuineness and authenticity of those very claims – incredible and “unbelievable” that they may initially appear.