

RESURRECTION – THEN AND NOW

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Newcomers to the Christian faith can ask such difficult questions. Whether they are teens who have always been in the church and are now developing a faith of their own, or adult seekers searching for something more, something to give life meaning and hope, someone in whom to believe, someone to help, they can ask difficult questions. Questions we often don't ask though we must admit that they linger in the back of our minds.

Questions like one asked, "How do we know the Bible is true?" "How do we know these things ever happened? I think someone just made it all up."

These are important questions, aren't they? Questions about truth. What's true? How do we know? And beneath them all, are these things important? What difference does it make?

When I began my theological studies my first essay was on that topic – revelation and knowing. How do we know what is true? It seemed to me that was the primary question upon which all other answers hinged.

Even now I wonder about these stories in scripture. The one in John is often used at funerals, the raising of Lazarus. I don't use it often myself because it begs a question from the bereaved,

a question they may not actually verbalise in words, but a question that I don't want to answer. If Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, why wasn't my loved one raised? Mary and Martha said that if Jesus had been there their brother would not have died. Was Jesus not there for my loved one? Then even though Lazarus died, Jesus through God's power raised him. Wasn't God there for my loved one? Why wasn't my loved one raised? Why don't we see resurrection now and then? Is the story untrue? Did it never happen? Or worse, can it not happen? Does God not care?

With the advent of scientific research in Biblical studies some 200 years ago everything in the Bible is questioned. Nothing is taken at face value, literally. Scholars are seekers too seeking the truth about Jesus and about God, seeking answers to questions of our faith.

Perhaps you've heard about the Jesus Seminar. It rises into the news every now and then. It's an interdenominational group of scholars who are looking at the words of Jesus in the gospels and asking, did Jesus actually say this? What did Jesus say?

Perhaps you have one of these Red Letter Bibles in which the words of Jesus are printed in red. The Jesus Seminar's Scholar's Version of the Bible uses four colours. Red means Jesus said this. This is as good as it gets. Pink, a weak form of red, means that these words are a little less certain and were probably modified as they were passed down. Bold Black means that Jesus

never said this. Someone, friend or even foe, put these words into his mouth. And then there is grey, not quite black. These words reflect Jesus' ideas, but he didn't say them. It has been quite a rigorous and intense exercise for these theological seekers. Their next project is, what did Jesus actually do?ⁱ

About 20 years ago, the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism in the United States issued a new Torah with commentary, the first in 60 years, which incorporated new findings in archaeology and other fields. What the commentary said is that Abraham and Sarah never existed. The walls of Jericho never fell because Jericho didn't have any walls. And most startling of all, Moses never existed, and the entire story of the Exodus from Egypt probably never occurred.ⁱⁱ

What then is true? Can we maintain faith amid such questions of authenticity and history?

To return to the scholarly realm for a moment, academics such as Brevard Childs, suggest what they call a canonical approach to scriptural interpretation.ⁱⁱⁱ Speaking simplistically, very simplistically, I would say that this approach emphasises the significance of the final form of the Bible with all its changes, historical inaccuracies, and modifications. The final form is what the Church says and has said bears witness to God and God's will, to God's Son Jesus and his love, and to God's Spirit and her work in the world. It's not that all this work around historical issues isn't important or even interesting. It's just not critical,

not crucial to faith and to understanding the Biblical message.

What is important is the faith behind it, not the history. What is important is the truth about God, who Jesus reveals God to be and how the Holy Spirit allows us to experience God. Chuck Meyers in his book *Dying Church/Living God* wrote, “*exactly what [Jesus] said* – in terms of the precise words he used – doesn’t matter. What matters is *that* he said things about love, forgiveness, community, the kingdom of heaven, and the nature of God and humankind, all of which are paralleled (and often corroborated) in the other gospels. It doesn’t matter whether we know exactly *who* he was. It matters that we know *that* he was. It doesn’t matter whether we know exactly *what* he did. It matters that we know *that* he did it.”^{iv}

Rabbi Susan Grossman of Beth Shalom Congregation in Columbia, Maryland, and a co-editor of the new Torah and commentary, remarked, “The real issue for me is the eternal truths that are in the text. How do we apply this hallowed text to the 21st century?”^v

Precisely so. What is important is the truth contained within the texts and how we apply it in the 21st century.

You see despite the debatable points there are irrefutable facts of history to be considered. The story of the Exodus, whether historically factual or not, forged a people of faith, built a nation, a nation that even though battered and bruised over history came back again and again to this God, a nation that

despite its ties to a land, to a city and to a temple still found God, or better, was found by God, in the wilderness of loneliness, exile, desolation and despair. They were resurrected as a community again and again by that resurrection story of the Exodus. Resurrection happened then.

Regardless of what sayings and deeds of Jesus are factually correct his story, this person, forged a people of faith from which a world-wide movement grew and the church was established.

When reading the Bible have you ever noticed how dim and dumb the disciples seem to be? They are with Jesus in the flesh. They know him. They see him and what he does. They hear him and what he says. They accompany him and see the profound effect he has on people. They feel the profound effect he has on them, but they don't really get it. They can't seem to put it together. They constantly misunderstand. They ask embarrassing and foolish questions. They act in ways that betray their confusion. At the end they run away and hide.

But then something truly remarkable, almost unbelievable happened. They are resurrected in a way they could not have expected. Jesus comes to them on the third day following his death. It is so real to them that they called it resurrection. But more importantly it was so real that it resurrected them. It transformed them, changed them. From dimwitted, dull traitors they became martyrs, all of them, the beginning of a force that ultimately changed the world and world history.

Chuck Meyers describes it this way. He says that at Jesus' death the power of God exploded out of him, and it imploded into everything and everyone, permanently and indelibly. The power of God expanded into the world, into his disciples, even into his enemies, in ways neither they, nor we, ever imagined. Resurrection happened then.

And so, we ask, we wonder, we hope, can it happen now, happen here? Can the resurrection happen here and now?

The raising of Lazarus was not meant to be a normal, everyday event. Even Lazarus would one day die again like we all do. Rather the story was for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified, so that we would know Jesus as more than teacher or even healer, but as the one in whom is life and from whom comes new life, resurrection, here and now. This story points beyond itself, beyond Lazarus, to Jesus, to his death, to his resurrection. Jesus' death would be once and for all. He would never die again. This story witnesses to a power, to a force that brings new life, a force that brings resurrection. "Do you believe this?" he asks. Do you believe this?

We need to believe it, don't we? That's what seekers seek, resurrection – now and then, the experience of the force, the power of God, in their daily lives, new life. We need to believe in the resurrection now because our lives, our ordinary, daily lives are filled with little deaths. A young woman is finally home battling the last stages of breast cancer; her husband and sister

battling grief. A family mourns the loss of a child. The parents of Rehtaeh Parsons and Amanda Todd remind us of the consequences of cyberbullying, teenage violence and its tragic consequences and that some things can't be changed or undone. Refugees come to our country welcomed by friends, family and church supporters but grieving the loss of land, country, culture and language. A friend dropped in to see me some time ago and spoke of the death of a 20-year friendship. Little deaths of disappointment, disturbance, worry, dissatisfaction, frustration, and disillusionment fill our lives. Again, Meyers writes, "These are little deaths, the realities of growing through childhood, adolescence, adulthood, middle and old age; the movement through school, career, marriage, children, community work, hobbies, social interaction, and the gradual descent through and loss of all those same things. All of these stages and times involve deaths."^{vi} We need more than intellectual answers of scholarly seekers. We need affirmations that touch the soul and bolster the spirit and assure us that Christ can bring life out of death.

Abraham Joshua Heschel writes about the demise of religion in our society saying, "Religion declined not because it was refuted, but because it became irrelevant, dull, oppressive, insipid. When faith is completely replaced by creed, worship by discipline, love by habit; when the crisis of today is ignored because of the splendour of the past, when faith becomes an

heirloom rather than a living fountain; when religions speak only in the name of authority rather than the voice of compassion – its message becomes meaningless.”^{vii}

Heschel goes on to ask, “Is our religious attitude one of conviction or a mere assertion? Is the existence of God a probability to us or a certainty? Is God a mere word to us, a name, a possibility, a hypothesis, or is [God] a living presence?”^{viii}

We need God to be a certainty, a living presence, not in a book or another place, but here. We need our faith to be relevant and uplifting and powerful, a living fountain and the voice of compassion. We need the resurrection to be something not just then, but something now, something new.

This is what we have. This is what the Bible bears witness to, a God who seeks us out and cries over our pain, a God who can take our dry bones and give them life again^{ix}, a God who calls us from places of death and breaths life into us again.

In the comic strip *For Better, For Worse* Heather and her friends are toasting St. Patrick.

“So what did he do?!”

“He brought Christianity to Ireland?”

“What else?”

“I don’t know. There’s Finn. He’s from Belfast – Let’s ask him!”

“Finn! What did St. Patrick do, besides bring Christianity to Ireland?”

“Wasn’t that enough?” Finn replies.

What did Jesus do? What do we know for sure he did and said? He brought us new life, resurrection here and now. Of that we can be certain. Isn’t that enough? It is, isn’t it?

ⁱ Robert W. Funk, *et.al.*, *The Five Gospels – What Did Jesus Really Say?* (Harper Collins, 1997).

ⁱⁱ Michael Massing, “As Rabbis Face Facts, Bible Tales Are Wilting,” *New York Times* (Saturday, March 9, 2002).

ⁱⁱⁱ Brevard S. Childs, *New Testament as Canon – An Introduction* (Trinity Press International, 1994) and *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (1979).

^{iv} Chuck Meyers, *Dying Church/Living God* (Northstone, 2000) p. 71.

^v Quoted in Massing, *op.cit.*.

^{vi} Meyers, *op.cit.*, p. 85.

^{vii} Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1955) p. 3.

^{viii} *Ibid.*, p. 9.

^{ix} Ezekiel 37: 1-14.