

Reason to Believe: Can a Modern Person Believe in Resurrection?

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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Reverend Peter Jonker

1 Corinthians 15:1-20

Everywhere we look we can see death. I don't mean to start my sermon on a gloomy note, I'm just speaking the matter-of-fact truth. Every living thing dies. Plants, animals, insects, birds, humans. You can't go for a walk in your neighborhood without coming across dead things. "Change and decay in all around I see." says the hymn. That's true. Given death's prevalence, you would think that we would have it figured out. But that's not the case. Human beings are still perplexed by death.

You all know the children's show Sesame Street. It's been around for more than 50 years and some of the most beloved children's characters of the last two generations have come out of that show. Kermit and Cookie Monster, Ernie and Bert, Elmo, Oscar and Big Bird. One of the most famous episodes of the show took place way back in 1982. Back then there was a character on the show named Mr. Hooper. Do you old people like me remember him? He was the owner of the store on Sesame Street. Mr. Hooper was played by an actor named Will Lee. In 1982, while still a regular character on the show, Will Lee died suddenly of a heart attack. And the producers of the show were forced to account for his sudden departure. They decided to address the subject head on, to have the Mr. Hooper character die suddenly too. In what is generally regarded as one of the most important moments in daytime television, they recorded a scene where Mr. Hooper's great friend Big Bird finds out about his death.

Big Bird draws a picture of Mr. Hooper and wants to give it to his friend, but Susan tells him that Mr. Hooper isn't there anymore. "That's fine," says Big Bird, "I'll just wait till he comes back and give it to him then." "Ooh Big Bird, Mr. Hooper isn't coming back," says Susan. "Why not?" says Big Bird. "Big Bird, when people die, they don't come back." "Never?" "No. Never." "W-Why not?" "They're dead Big Bird, they can't come back." Big Bird can't accept this and he says, "I don't understand! You know everything was just fine! I mean why does it have to be this way?! Give me one good reason!" "Big bird it has to be this way...because." "Just because?" "Just because."

That's a sad and honest moment. Sad because it reveals the pain of death. Honest because it shows how we are perplexed by death. Death confounds us. Artists and scientists, philosophers and poets, have all wrestled with it, and yet, for many people, "just because" is as close as they come to an explanation.

In the church of Jesus Christ, in the face of death, we have a better word than "just because,". In the face of death questions, we don't say "just because," we say "Alleluia!" We say "I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting!" But that doesn't mean we aren't still perplexed sometimes. Throughout the history of the church, even while the alleluias are on their lips, people have struggled to accept the resurrection. Throughout the history of the church, in their darker, more perplexed moments, good Christian people sometimes wonder if it's all true, or if it's just wishful thinking. It's understandable. You might remember that according to Matthew, that uncertainty was already there after the very first Easter Sunday. A short time after the resurrection, the disciples gather on a mountain in Galilee. Jesus comes to them and according to Matthew 28:17, they worshipped Him, but some doubted. "Is this real? Or is it wishful thinking?" It doesn't help that there are plenty of people telling us that it can't be

true. In a debate with a Christian Professor, Richard Dawkins said this, “[The resurrection of Jesus] has a fundamental incompatibility [with] the sophisticated scientist...It’s so petty, it’s so trivial, it’s so local, it’s so earth-bound, it’s so unworthy of the universe.” In some circles, believing in the resurrection is a little like believing in Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny. It’s the sign of a weak and childish mind.

Apparently the Corinthian church was wrestling with resurrection doubt. It was the deaths in their own congregation that started the problem. When Paul first preached the gospel to them, when he first told them that Jesus Christ had risen from the dead and ascended into heaven and was coming again to judge the living and the dead, like most of the early church, they assumed that would happen soon. Maybe a matter of months. But then the time stretched on and people began to die, and they found themselves standing over the graves of church members. They found themselves at the bedside of dying friends and family. And as far as they could see, death looked exactly the same as it did before they became Christians. It was just as cold, just as hard. It looked just as final. And so some of them started to question the resurrection. They didn’t completely deny it, but they started to change the terms: they started to say that it wasn’t physical. It wasn’t a bodily resurrection. Jesus body didn’t come stumbling out of the tomb. His heart didn’t restart and His blood didn’t begin flowing. The resurrection was just spiritual. The Spirit of Jesus lives on and it lives in us when we transcend the life of the body in Spiritual joy and ecstasy. Maybe it’s the ecstasy we feel when we’re speaking in tongues, maybe that’s resurrection. In fact, if you read the whole letter, the Corinthians began to spiritualize everything.

What does Paul have to say to all of this? What does he say to the doubts of the Corinthians? What does he say to our doubts? Well first of all, Paul is pretty clear about the importance of the resurrection as a doctrine. Paul isn’t interested in any metaphorical takes on our new life.

He’s not interested in talk of raised consciousness or resurrected hopes. If Christ hasn’t been raised, if He did come alive body and soul, then our faith is futile. If the resurrection isn’t real, fold up the tent and go home. Without the resurrection, there’s no hope. Paul doesn’t just declare the importance of the resurrection; he does some apologetics too. He offers some reasons to believe. Reasons why the Corinthian church should believe that Jesus physically rose from the grave. He appeals to the witnesses. Paul says: “Look, I know the resurrection seems like an impossible thing, but you can believe the resurrection because there are all sorts of people who saw it! The 12 disciples, James, Myself, and 500 others besides.” Paul’s instinct is exactly what ours is when someone questions a story that we tell: he thinks of people that could corroborate his words. “Hey, I know it’s an incredible story, but I’m really not making this up! Go ask Cephas! Go ask James! They saw it too!” What makes Paul’s appeal to the witnesses effective, and for me believable, is that the Corinthians really could go and check Paul’s references. Virtually all of them were alive. They could actually check Paul’s story.

Of course, some people will say, ‘yes but how do you know that those 500 people aren’t part of the cover up! How do you know that they aren’t in on the conspiracy to make up this resurrection tale? Of course Paul tells you to just ask the witnesses! The witnesses have all been coached!’ You can’t trust them. They’re all in on the conspiracy. But a close look at Scripture will show you: that’s unlikely. A close look at Scripture will tell you that these witnesses may be more reliable than you think.

1. First of all, if you are trying to make up a story and coach some people to be false witnesses to your story, you don’t choose 500 people. You keep the number of witnesses as small as possible. It’s just too hard to keep 500 people on message. Someone is going to crack

under cross-examination. Under persecution, someone is going to spill the beans: "It's all made up. I never really saw the risen Jesus. We made up the whole story. Peter told us to do it." Nobody makes up a story by trying to coach 500 witnesses. They choose a small circle of 4 or 5 trustworthy people, they make sure everyone gets their story straight, and they keep the lid on tight. To me, the number of witnesses makes Paul's claim believable.

2. Another fact that speaks against the possibility of a conspiracy: the fact that the gospel's accounts of the resurrection aren't all the same. Read the gospels, and you will see that Matthew, Mark, Luke and John all tell the story of Jesus' death and resurrection in a slightly different way. For example, in John it sounds like Mary Magdalene went to the tomb by herself on Easter morning and found it empty. In Matthew it's Mary Magdalene and the other Mary. In Mark, it's Mary, the other Mary and Salome. And in Luke it just 'the women.' The gospels agree on the main events, but differ in details. Maybe you think that makes them less trustworthy, but I think it makes them more believable. If you were trying to make up the story that Jesus arose, you would get the story straight between you. Like the bad guys do in the movies: "Ok everyone here's our story, let's get it all straight so we tell the police exactly the same thing." But the gospels don't do that. Each witness tells it as they remember it so there are differences about how many angels were at the tomb, and who arrived first and which women were there. It's not a made up story. It's real testimony! It's real memories!

3. Another reason to trust the witnesses: the women. In every one of the gospels, women were the first to come to the tomb and find it empty. If you were making up a story, you would NEVER write it this way. Why? Because in those days, the witness of a woman wasn't accepted in court. Sorry, but it's true. To establish something, you need the testimony of two or three witnesses and the witnesses needed to be male. A female witness was judged unreliable. That being the case, if you were trying to make up a believable story, you would never start with witness of women. Again, to me this shows that real eyewitness testimony is behind these accounts; it's not a made up story.

4. I also find Paul's witnesses believable because of the way they portray themselves in the story. If you were trying to make up a story for other people to believe, would you record your own doubts in the story? That's what we have in the gospel. In every one of the 4 resurrection accounts, the disciples doubt and deny and disbelieve. "The words of the women seemed to them like nonsense," says Luke. Again, not the way you'd write it if you were making something up.

5. And to me, what makes the resurrection witness most believable of all is the fact that people died for this story. Early on, one of the witnesses, James the apostle, is killed by King Herod for his belief in Jesus. He was the first of many. If James had made this up, if all these 500 had made these things up, would they have endured insults, imprisonment, beatings, floggings, sleepless nights and even death, all for the sake of a hoax? "I handed on to you what I in turn had received: That Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas and then to the twelve." Here is the news to shout in the face of death. Here are the words to say at the graveside of your loved ones. Here are words that are trustworthy and true. Jesus is risen and we shall arise: alleluia."

Now does all this prove the resurrection? No. It doesn't. You can't prove something like the resurrection. As I've mentioned previously in this sermon series, you can't prove foundational beliefs. We can't prove that God exists. An unbeliever can't prove that He doesn't. At the foundations, we all live by faith. This evidence doesn't prove faith, but there is more than

enough here for us to trust the witnesses. There is more than enough here for us to give strength to our resurrection hopes.

And we need those hopes. The resurrection is not just a belief that we need in cemeteries, we need it every day. The resurrection reminds us every day when we face hard things, impossible situations, and overwhelming problems, there is a way through. The resurrection reminds us that we don't face the world and our problems armed only with human hopes. What a terrible thing that would be. Later in 1 Corinthians 15 Paul makes this point with respect to his own life: "If I fought wild beasts in Ephesus with no more than human hopes, what have I gained?" But Paul doesn't face the wild beasts with human hopes, he faces them with resurrections hopes!

To all of us terrified by the polarization in our society, for all of us who are beginning to wonder how we will ever reconcile the different opinions, the different views of reality that are becoming more and more entrenched in our society, I declare to you Christ is risen. There is a way through.

To the person wrestling with the diminishments of age. You can feel your strength waning, and it's like you're losing your significance. You used to be in the center of things, but now you don't get asked to be on committees and people don't listen to your opinion like they used to, and you just feel as though life has lost its color. I declare to you, Christ is risen. There is a way through.

To the principal trying to figure out how you are supposed to put together an educational program for this coming fall; How can I protect teachers, how can I protect students, how am I supposed to get substitutes, how am I going to keep enrollment? How am I going to keep this institution together when half the parents think I'm being too cautious and half the people think I'm being reckless? I declare to you Christ is risen. There is a way through. Paul says, "If only for this life we have hope, we are of all people most to be pitied. But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead." His love is stronger than death. His hope is stronger than your fear. Don't be afraid good people! Live every day in His strength.

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