

## **Resurrection (Part One)**

***“Why should any of you consider it incredible?”***

Reflection 26 in the series “A New World in the Morning”

We’re in a series of essays on “A New World in the Morning” in recognition that much is changing in the world today, even – maybe especially – in the world of faith. Old forms are passing away. New ones are being born, hence the title of this series. And we’re doing this series partly because of the many people who do not go to church but who in some sense deeply believe in God, who’ve just had a hard time finding God in religion as they have experienced it, and who now wonder about many of the traditional doctrines of Christian faith. Some of these doctrines, especially as they have traditionally been passed down over the centuries, don’t make sense. And we are all probably better off without them.

But with this essay we turn to celebration of one of the truly big, good ones – resurrection. And maybe we sometimes wonder about even this. We want to believe but sometimes we’re not so sure. Or most of the time we believe but these niggling little doubts sometimes disturb us. So let’s work with this and see what we can make of resurrection.

The first thing I’ll suggest is: Just check your heart. Just stop and look and see. Your heart knows it goes on and on and on. Some people don’t know that, but their hearts do. If they would just get back in touch with their hearts, they’d know. Sometimes it’s as simple as something C.S. Lewis once said, “If I find in myself desires which nothing in this world can satisfy, the only logical explanation is that I was made for another world.” And I think that’s true – that I find in myself desires which nothing in this world can satisfy because I was made for another world.

So the question we are asking is one the apostle Paul asked back in the early days of the Christian church, “Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?” Now it seems obvious that many people do consider it incredible at least judged by the way they live their lives. Many, many people – even many churchgoers – live their lives paying no attention at all to life after death, giving no time or effort to it, and making no investment in it. They assume apparently that: Death is final. Justice is largely illusory. Life is mainly a matter of brute force and dumb luck. History is not necessarily going anywhere. Suffering is just that: suffering – mindless, dumb and brutish. Life always ends badly. And one’s life has no real transcendent purpose. Those are, to say the least, remarkable assumptions to make.

Consider Paul’s question in the light of its context in Acts 26:1-8. This is the story. The apostle Paul has returned to Jerusalem after many years away. But he ends up being arrested and is then sent to the Roman headquarters and prison in Caesarea. Some two years later he finds himself in front of a Roman governor named Festus who is entertaining King Herod Agrippa II and his wife. Agrippa is king of a small territory to the northeast of the Sea of Galilee. The Roman Festus is intrigued and bewildered by

Paul and the things he's heard about him, and he hopes that Agrippa whose roots are a bit more local can give him some insight into what to do with Paul.

So at the command of Festus Paul is brought in and given opportunity to explain himself. The first thing Paul does is reaffirm his own Jewish identity, "Everyone knows that accordingly to the strictest sect of our religion I lived as a Pharisee. And now it is because of my hope in what God has promised our fathers that I am on trial today." This leads him to resurrection, so in Acts 26:8 he asks, "Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?"

Paul then tells his own story, of how he had come to see that Jesus was the one to whom Hebrew scripture had always pointed. And when Festus expresses skepticism, Paul says (now in verse 26), "It was not done in a corner." If only everyone today could remember this! It was not done in a corner. It's not a myth. There was nothing secretive about this. "I've just spent two years in prison for this!" Paul could say. It happened in history, in public space and time, on a certain weekend in springtime, in Passover season, just outside the walls of Jerusalem! Hundreds were firsthand witnesses. Judaism has been practically split. And thousands more believed because they saw the power, the goodness, the love of this faith: that this faith really is the way, that it's true to what our hearts have always known. But it was not done in a corner.

So the question remains: Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead? Why should you doubt what your own heart knows to be true? Let's first begin with focusing on the intellect, just reasoning it through. And a good case can be made for the resurrection of Jesus. Sometimes I think it's simply a matter of getting everyone to follow the real logical consequences of what they say they believe, to be true to the implications of what they believe, to take even a day in their lives and just for that day follow the consequences. And that is that if the dead are not raised, death is final. Gross injustices stand and are never resolved. Life is largely a matter of brute force and dumb luck. History is not necessarily going anywhere, at least anywhere we would want to go. Suffering is just suffering, and has no redemptive value. Life always ends badly. And one's life has no real transcendent purpose. And if these premise appeal to you, if they strike you as reasonable, if they make sense to you, O.K., but be consistent.

Conversely, it is resurrection that makes all the difference in life. It is resurrection that tells us: Death is not the last word. You will live again, gloriously, with bodies that are both recognizable and yet transformed, no longer weighed down by sin, disease, fear or anything else that holds us back. Injustices do not stand. Suffering has redemptive purposes. History has purpose. One's life has transcendent purpose.

This the Christian faith asserts: The foundation fact – both in history and in life – is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. It is in this fact, event, moment, story that God has decisively revealed his purposes for the world, and has achieved them. This – the dying and rising of Jesus – is the light by which things are seen as they really are. There is no higher light by which to see anything. There is no higher light. Sometimes we keep

waiting – even many churchgoers in America keep waiting – for something by which to evaluate the truth of resurrection.

And I can give you evidence. I can tell you about the empty tomb. If you've ever been to Jerusalem, you know how close together all these places are, and you know that there was a Sunday in Jerusalem when the story began to circulate that anyone could run out after supper and in ten minutes know that the tomb was empty. I can tell you about transformed lives, witnesses so sure of their facts that they died for them. I can tell you about a faith exploding across the Mediterranean world. I can point simply to the existence of the Four Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Understand them however you want, interpret them however you want; the significant point is they exist. Why?

I can give you evidence but the truth is there is no higher certainty by which this can be evaluated. This is God's doing! What is it that we could do that would authenticate God? This truth is too big. This truth is beyond category. Resurrection cannot be fitted into any world view except the one of which it is the starting point. It is bigger than any other world view. And it is the starting point for a whole new and higher way of understanding our human experience – a way that in the long run makes better sense of human experience as a whole. This is the real story of which your life story is a part. And may we never for a moment be defensive or apologetic in saying so.

– Dale Pauls

*Part Two (of two) next week*