

PASTOR'S NOTES. Resurrection primer, part 2

*“And if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that He raised Christ—whom He did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.*

*But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.”*

(1 Corinthians 15:14-20, NRSV)

In the last article, I reminded us that the message Paul delivered throughout Asia and Europe was that Jesus Christ rose from the dead. That he considered this the essential part of his message is reflected in the passage above. I also mentioned “minimal facts” relating to the resurrection:

1. Jesus died by crucifixion
2. Testimony of witnesses that He appeared to them
3. Conversion of Saul/Paul
4. Conversion of James
5. The empty tomb

The argument I follow here is that the best explanation of these “minimal facts” is that Jesus physically rose from the dead. Most persons who study the resurrection of Jesus will grant these facts (though #5, the empty tomb, is the most controversial), but some are not convinced that the resurrection really happened.

For Christians, probably the witness of the disciples (#2) has been the strongest point. Some may argue that the disciples were mistaken in what they experienced, but few doubt that the disciples were convinced that the risen Jesus appeared to them.

There have been persons over the centuries who have argued that the disciples lied about these appearances, or understood them only as some kind of visions, or had some kind of mass hallucination. The problem with these alternate explanations is first that they don't seem to adequately cover why the disciples seemed so determined to risk persecution and even death by proclaiming the risen Lord. Further, people of that time knew as well as us about visions, dreams, and hallucinations, and certainly would not have been gullible about those matters when life was dangerous.

There is a popular view today that Christianity was made up by the Catholic Church or even the Roman empire; that is easy to imagine in our day when the church has for so long wielded power and control over much of society. For centuries, we have read and heard about leaders using religion to control the masses. But this analysis doesn't work when we examine our history more closely. We have actual fragments of New Testament documents that date as early as the 200s, and other evidence that there were Christians even before 100. This is long before Christianity had any influence in the society. It appears that over the first three hundred years of its existence, Christian faith was either under the radar of society, or in places it was actively persecuted. So making up the Christian story and declaring these appearances would not grant anyone power, influence, or fame.

This is even more pronounced when we consider not only the testimony of the disciples (#2), but also the conversions of Paul (#3) and James (#4). There seems to be little controversy about the ministry of Paul. While there are some who believe that Jesus never existed, almost nobody doubts that Paul was. In fact, some skeptics even assert that Paul made up the whole Christian story. But by Paul's own words, he was an enemy of Christians. He would have been as suspicious as anyone of their claims to have seen the risen Jesus. But he has an experience of Jesus of his own (though in his case it is not a bodily resurrection, it is more of a "vision" and a voice – Acts 9). While his experience is not a resurrection, the words that he preaches in 1 Corinthians 15:3-8 clearly indicated that he came to believe that the other disciples were accurate in their witness to the risen Lord, that he met several of them personally, and at the time he was writing that letter, many of them were still alive and available to be interviewed.

The conversion of James, the brother of Jesus (#4) is not as well known as Paul's experience, but it provides additional support to the belief in the resurrection. There is not a lot of information about this James. John 7:5 and Mark 3:21, 31 suggest that the Jesus' brothers did not initially believe in Jesus and His ministry. James is mentioned later as a leader of Christians in Acts 12:17, 15:13, 21:18, and by Paul in Galatians 1:19, 2:9, 2:12, and 1 Corinthians 15:7. But he is also mentioned in non-Biblical sources; Josephus mentions him as being killed as a follower of Christ. So that is some evidence outside of the Bible of him specifically as a follower of Jesus. This evidence also strengthens our point that there was a Jesus ministry truly existing in the first century.

I consider this to be an important matter for Christians today because Paul and the early church insisted it was from the beginning. It is unfortunate that many Christians have grown up in the church and not realized the importance of the resurrection to being a Christian, or to realize that without the resurrection, there would be no New Testament – there would have been no reason for those letters and gospels to have been written. None of this information will make someone believe; many who study the resurrection still remain skeptical or even atheistic. But it appears that when one examines the information closely (and this has been a quick, surface look here), it becomes more difficult to deny. Indeed, I am aware of at least a few scholars who do not believe Jesus actually rose from the dead, but acknowledge that they do not (yet) have a satisfying alternate explanation for the 5 "minimal facts." They are still looking for something else.

In our tradition we see that we humans make decisions about what is true and the authority of our lives by looking to scripture, tradition, experience, and reason. While I have given a bit of the "reason" side to consider putting faith in Christ, it is not enough by itself. The resurrection of Jesus is an improbable event; I personally believe that God intended it that way, along with all the other subtle clues to His presence. Each of us has to make a decision for ourselves about truth, but perhaps more importantly, what is the truth we will live and die by.

Those of us who are Christians today are this because there were persons who could have kept their truth to themselves, but instead decided to live by it, and die for it.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the name 'Ken' written in a cursive style.