

PASTOR'S NOTES. Resurrection primer, part 1

*“For I handed on to you as of first importance 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, then to the twelve. Then He appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared also to me.”*

(1 Corinthians 15:3-8, NRSV)

We have been told all our lives that we cannot prove the existence or the absence of God. This should make sense, because the only things we could ever know about a higher power are those that the higher power chooses to let us know. We came into a world we did not create, we are bound in space and time, we cannot step out of our humanity to view it from another being's perspective, nor can we even conceive what that is like. So it really shouldn't be a surprise to us that we ultimately have to choose what to believe, and to have faith in (live our lives trusting on): whether a purposeless universe that is wholly contained by human-experienced laws, a God as presented by one or more of the religious traditions of the world, or the God represented by Jesus Christ.

With all the choices, it would seem that the Christian idea, not only that there is a God, but that this God became human and actually died and came back to life, would take the greatest leap of faith. And yet, as Paul traveled his known world preaching about the resurrection of Christ, he also argued that this was the essential part of our faith:

*“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 their book [The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus](#), Mike Licona and Gary Habermas argue that if you consider what they call five “minimal facts,” then belief in the resurrection is not only reasonable, but perhaps the most reasonable approach to our lives. Remember, we cannot even know if we are in a dream right now. Essentially, the greater reality outside ourselves we can never truly know, but we live by faith in the external world, in the true existence of others, and for most of us of Christian faith, in the reality of a higher power Who created, Who communicates, and Who loves.

I should mention that there are many Christians who do not believe in the resurrection of Christ, or don't believe it could have happened except as a kind of spiritual vision. This is striking, considering the scriptures that I've quoted, but not surprising when you consider that most Christians identify with a history and tradition that they do not know and a Bible that they have barely read.

So, because every Christian should know this, let's consider the authors' “minimal facts:”

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

Now historical “facts” are not the same as other facts. We have no way of going back and testing them. We can only see them in terms of probability; an event is very likely to have occurred, and somewhat likely, or less likely, or unlikely. The most likely historical events are those in which we have memory and documentation; such as my marriage: if I only had my memory, I might have dreamt the whole thing. But since I have video of the wedding, testimony of people who were there, a marriage license, a ring on my finger, and the testimony of a person living with me, I consider it is very likely to have occurred. Again, my faith in the reliability of my perceptions plays an important role here.

In the case of these five historical events, the authors argue that most persons who study the subject (whether they believe in God or not) agree that these are likely or at least somewhat likely to have occurred. This does not mean they accept the Christian implications of these.

Most believe the claim that there was a Jesus who was crucified because there is no reason to think that this much would have been made up. The name ‘Jesus’ is the Greek form of the name Joshua, it was a very common name for Jewish men, and crucifixion was the typical Roman form of execution for non-Roman criminals. So there were probably many named Jesus who were crucified. That at least one was a rabbi (or teacher) who crossed the authorities in some way would seem likely. The first preachers would have to explain that they believe in a Savior who was defeated and killed; this is a bit of an embarrassment to everyone who hears it for the first time. This adds to the credibility of the story. So while there are persons who deny that Jesus ever existed, most instead grant that He was a historical person, they differ on whether He is the Son of God as He or the early church said He was.

I do not have the space to go over the other four events now, so I’ll try again next month. But I can say briefly that the fifth is the most controversial of the list, as several scholars claim it really comes down to only one source that was copied to the four gospels and it is not mentioned by Paul. Still, I can say more about its reasonableness. The fourth event is one of the more convincing to historians because it comes more from sources outside the Bible than in it. The third event is probably the most widely attested, as even people who deny that there was a Jesus usually believe there was a Paul. The second event, though, is by far the most important: that persons testified that Jesus appeared to them risen from the dead, and they were willing to suffer and die for this. This does not by itself mean that it actually happened, but it strongly suggests they fully believed it happened (and they knew all about dreams and hallucinations). I invite you to meditate on that event for a bit, and all of us should have been meditating on that all along, and I’ll say more next time.

Yours in Christ,

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