

Can 21st Century People Believe in Jesus' Resurrection?

Insights from *The Case for Jesus* by Brant Pitre

What about the resurrection?¹

Why did the closest disciples of Jesus come to believe that he had been raised from the dead? And what did it mean for them, as first-century Jews, to say that Jesus was "resurrected"?

What the Resurrection is Not

1. The first Christians are not claiming that he had simply come back to ordinary earthly life ("resuscitation").
 - o Jairus' twelve-year-old daughter (Matthew 9:18-26; Mark 5:21-43; Luke 8:40-56) and Lazarus are examples of resuscitation (John 11:38-44).
 - o Eventually each one of them would die again.
2. The first Christians were also not claiming that Jesus' soul or spirit was "alive" with God.
 - o Many 1st century Jews believed that death was the separation of the "soul" from the body, and that the soul could live in a state of "immortality".
 - o They did not go around proclaiming, "The spirit of Jesus is with God!" or "Jesus is alive to God!". Instead they went around proclaiming the "resurrection" of Jesus' "body".
 - o Something happened to Jesus' corpse- something radically, fundamentally different from what was believed to have happened to the bodies of all the other people who had ever died.
3. The first Christians were not claiming that he was "exalted to heaven" after he died.
 - o In the Gospels there is a clear distinction between the resurrection of Jesus from the tomb and the ascension of Jesus into heaven (John 20:16-17).

"The earliest Christian documents give a casual and unemphatic assent to the belief that the supernatural part of a man survives the death of the natural organism. But they are very little interested in the matter. What they are intensely interested in is the restoration or 'resurrection' of the whole composite creature by a miraculous divine act.." _ C. S. Lewis in *Miracles*

What the Resurrection Is

1. The resurrected Jesus has a body. He is not a ghost. (Luke 24:36-43)
2. The resurrected Jesus has the same body that he had while he was alive. (John 20:24-29)
3. The resurrected Jesus has a transformed body.
 - o Jesus' resurrected body could change or veil its appearance (Luke 24:16) and walk through closed doors (John 20:19), but was physical enough to be physically touched and one that ate food (John 21).
 - o Jesus had a new, glorified body and in this glorified body, Jesus would never die again. Ever.

¹ Everything contained in this document is almost entirely quoted from *The Case for Jesus* by Brad Pitre, specifically chapter 12 titled "The Resurrection".

Why Did Anyone Believe in the Resurrection of Jesus?

Why would anyone believe such a thing? Even if you personally don't believe Jesus was raised from the dead, you still have to be able to explain historically how it is that the first disciples - and thousands of Jesus after them, as well as countless Gentiles - came to believe in his resurrection. How is it that belief in Jesus' bodily resurrection swept like wildfire through the ancient Jewish synagogues, beginning in Jerusalem, then on through Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth?

Maybe first we need to dispel the notion that people in AD 33 believed in the resurrection because they were prescientific, superstitious, and generally ignorant about how things like death worked. Enter CS Lewis' observation about the nature of miracles.

1. Belief in miracles, far from depending on an ignorance of the laws of nature, is only possible in so far as those laws are known.²
2. The scientific age came about expressly because of the Christian belief in an orderly God. "Theology," says Lewis, "says in effect, 'Admit God and with Him the risk of a few miracles, and [God] in return will ratify your faith in uniformity as regards the overwhelming majority of events....The philosophy which forbids you to make uniformity absolute is also the philosophy which offers you solid grounds for believing it to be general, to be almost absolute.'"³
3. The disciples came to believe in the resurrection of Jesus because of the empty tomb. (Mt 28:1-8; Mark 16:1-8; Luke 24:1-12; John 20:1-10)
4. People came to believe in the resurrection because of the appearances of the risen Jesus to those who knew him.
 1. Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene (Matthew 28:1-10; John 20:14-18)
 2. Jesus appears to several female disciples (Matthew 28:1-10; Mark 16:1-8; Luke 24:1-11)
 3. Jesus appears to Simon Peter (Luke 24:34; 1 Corinthians 15:5; John 21:1-24)
 4. Jesus appears to James, John, Thomas Nathanael and two others (John 21:1-24)
 5. Jesus appears to the eleven disciples as a group (Matthew 28:16-20; John 20:19-29)
 6. Jesus appears to Cleopas and one unnamed disciple (Luke 24:13-35)
 7. Jesus appears to more than five hundred "brothers" at once (1 Corinthians 15:6)
 8. Jesus appears to James (a.k.a. "the Lord's brother") (1 Corinthians 15:7; compare Galatians 2:19)
 9. Jesus appears to Saul of Tarsus (a.k.a. Paul) (1 Corinthians 15:8)
 - i. In the end, 11 of the 12 disciples died not for something they claimed to believe but for something they claimed to have seen. Many will die for a belief, but few would willingly die for what they no to be a lie. In every case all they had to do was renounce their faith in the bodily resurrection and they would have been spared.
5. Jesus' resurrection from the dead was the fulfillment of Jewish Scripture.⁴

² Page 75

³ Page 169

⁴ What Scriptures did Jesus' resurrection fulfill? There is only one passage from Jewish Scripture that Jesus cites as a direct prophecy of his resurrection on the third day: the so-called sign of Jonah. (Matthew 12:38-41; Luke 11:29-32). Further, "the author of the book never claims that Jonah remained alive for three days and three nights in the fish."

Can 21st Century People Believe in Jesus' Resurrection?

Insights from *Miracles* by C. S. Lewis

Before one concludes they were ignorant, gullible unscientific premodern people, consider C. S. Lewis' insight from *Miracles*.⁵

Isn't something like a resurrection simply an idea held by people "in olden times [who] believe in them because they didn't know the laws of Nature? Thus you will hear people say, The early Christians believed that Christ was the son of a virgin, but we know that this is a scientific impossibility. Such people seem to have an idea that belief in miracles arose at a period when men were so ignorant of the course of nature that they did not perceive a miracle to be contrary to it. A moment's thought shows this to be nonsense....Belief in miracles, far from depending on an ignorance of the laws of nature, is only possible in so far as those laws are known." (73-75)

Do miracles really happen? Are they even scientifically feasible?

"If you are writing a story, miracles or abnormal events may be bad art, or they may not. If, for example, you are writing an ordinary realistic novel and have got your characters into a hopeless muddle, it would be quite intolerable if you suddenly cut the knot and secured a happy ending by having a fortune left to the hero from an unexpected quarter. On the other hand there is nothing against taking as your subject from the outset the adventures of a man who inherits an unexpected fortune. The unusual event is perfectly permissible if it is what you are really writing about: it is an artistic crime if you simply drag it in by the heels to get yourself out of a hole. The ghost story is a legitimate form of art; but you must not bring a ghost into an ordinary novel to get over a difficulty in the plot....Death and Resurrection are what the story is about; and had we but eyes to see it, this has been hinted on every page, met us, in some disguise, at every turn, and even been muttered in conversations between such minor characters (if they are minor characters) as the vegetables." (156-157).

Doesn't science disprove, or disallow, the existence of miracles?

Lewis goes on to argue that it was the belief in God that led people to search for order and thus led to the scientific age ("Men became scientific because they expected Law in Nature, and they expected Law in Nature because they believed in a Legislator." History makes clear that were it not for Theology, especially Christian Theology of an Orderly Creator, there would be no science. So an orderly God made way for science. But, an orderly God also requires the potential for miracles. In his words, "if we admit God, we must admit Miracle" because the two go together. "Theology," says Lewis, "says in effect, 'Admit God and with Him the risk of a few miracles, and [he] in return will ratify your faith in uniformity as regards the overwhelming majority of events.'" He further argues "The philosophy which forbids you to make uniformity absolute is also the philosophy which offers you solid grounds for believing it to be general, to be almost absolute." (169).

⁵ Everything contained in this document is almost entirely quoted from *Miracles* by C. S. Lewis.