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## The Resurrection of Jesus and Christian Faith: Five Conferences for the Monks of New Camaldoli, Big Sur [Lecture Notes]

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**The Resurrection of Jesus and Christian Faith:  
Five Conferences for the Monks of New Camaldoli, Big Sur**

by

Scott Gambrill Sinclair



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## Preface

- I. The resurrection of Jesus was the historical foundation of Christianity.
  - A. Without the resurrection the “Jesus Movement” would not have endured.
    1. As the New Testament itself suggests, the crucifixion dashed the hopes of Jesus’s original followers (Luke 24:21).
    2. There were other messianic figures in first-century Palestine, and none of their movements long survived the death of the founder (Acts 5:34-37; Josephus).
    3. It seems clear that it was only the faith that Jesus had risen from the dead which caused his movement to endure.
  - B. The resurrection of Jesus was also the basis for perhaps the two most important doctrines of Christianity.
    1. The divinity of Christ.
      - a. Whatever Jesus may have claimed about himself, it was only at the resurrection that his followers concluded that he was divine. Note that even in John’s Gospel, which has the theme that Jesus is God incarnate and in which Jesus repeatedly publicly declares his divinity (8:58, 10:30), no disciple confesses Christ’s divinity until after the resurrection (20:28).
      - b. The resurrection experiences were similar to the experience of the divine. For example:
        - 1). We experience God as someone who has no limits and can appear in any time or place and yet is intimately personal.
        - 2). The risen Christ could appear in any time or place and yet was personal.
      - c. The risen Christ gave to his disciples the Spirit of God, and only God sends God (Donald Gelpi).
    2. Life after death.
      - a. In first-century Judaism there was debate about whether there was life after death, since the Sadducees denied it, whereas the Pharisees affirmed it.
      - b. But because of the resurrection of Jesus, the Church always proclaimed that the rest of us will also rise from the dead.
  - C. The resurrection led to the observance of Sunday (“The Lord’s Day”), and this observance became central to Christian worship and identity.
    1. The observance of the Sabbath was (and remains) central for Jewish law and life.
    2. Yet, very quickly in Christianity Sunday replaced the Sabbath as the holy day (e.g., Acts 20:7, Romans 14:5, 1 Cor. 16:2).
    3. The only possible explanation is that the empty tomb was discovered, and at least the initial resurrection appearance occurred on “the first day of the week” (Matt. 28:1, Mark 16:1-2, Luke 24:1, John 20:1).
- II. Nevertheless, the resurrection of Jesus remains a stumbling block.
  - A. Skeptics regard the resurrection of Jesus as ridiculous.

- B. The notion that at some future time the rest of us will like Jesus rise bodily from the tomb
  - 1. Has always been a fantastic idea.
  - 2. Has become even harder to believe after two thousand years of waiting.
- III. I believe that it is essential for church leaders, including monks, to think carefully about what we believe about the resurrection and why we believe it.
  - A. As teachers and preachers, we must proclaim the resurrection with confidence and integrity, and to do so, we must examine all of the evidence carefully.
  - B. And we must be prepared to engage in dialogue with a wide range of people from fundamentalists to skeptics, and to do that with wisdom, we must understand the (often implicit) bases of their opinions about the resurrection.
- IV. In the following conferences we will
  - A. Review the whole range of explanations for the early Church's claim that Jesus rose from the dead and the implicit presuppositions underlying the various viewpoints.
  - B. And I will share my presuppositions and attempt to show that they make sense.
  - C. We will then review the historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus.
  - D. And next deal with the theological and spiritual evidence for Jesus's resurrection.
  - E. As a result, you will see why I feel sure that Jesus rose from the dead.
  - F. Finally, we will see if we can affirm our own future resurrection after death and whether that affirmation is consistent with the resurrection of Jesus.

## Conference 1: Different Historical Explanations for the Claim that Jesus Rose from the Dead and the Larger Convictions Underlying Each

- I. The resurrection of Jesus raises crucial methodological problems for a historian, and we must start with a brief theoretical discussion.
- II. History is the reconstruction of the past which, of course, no longer exists.
- III. We reconstruct the past on the basis of several things:
  - A. Data (i.e., bits of information that have survived).
  - B. General convictions about what is real or most important. These vary from historian to historian and from culture to culture. Different historians and cultures assume that what (primarily?) shapes history is supernatural forces (e.g., the gods), changes in nature (e.g., in climate), great individuals, new ideas (e.g., monotheism or democracy), economics, or various other things.
  - C. Analogy. We assume that the past was in some way similar to the present and can be understood through present experience.
  - D. Correlation. We assume that a past event was a coherent whole, and we strive for a reconstruction that brings all the data into a meaningful pattern.
- IV. Reconstructing the resurrection of Jesus is problematic because the event poses severe difficulties in terms of the bases listed above.
  - A. The data is sparse (only a few pages), sometimes inconsistent (e.g., there are discrepancies over who went to the empty tomb and when), and often appears to be late (the earliest gospel, Mark, was four decades later) and tendentious (later accounts are more sensational). And all of the data comes from Christian sources.
  - B. The general assumptions with which people approach the resurrection material vary enormously depending both on one's faith and one's conviction about what is possible.
  - C. Christianity teaches that Jesus's resurrection has no analogy, and, historically, it cannot be established that a similar event ever occurred. I am not even aware of a serious claim that something comparable happened (i.e., that a historical human being died, was buried, and rose bodily from the tomb as Lord of the Universe). Note that the nearest analogy is the bodily assumption of Mary into heaven, and this doctrine was based on the idea that Mary's death and entrance into heaven should be similar to Jesus's.
  - D. Theoretically, it is not clear that an event which contains both natural and supernatural elements would necessarily be a coherent whole, and in practice it is hard to come up with a single scenario that explains all of the data.
- V. Given the above, the only undeniable historical fact is that at some point early Christians began to *proclaim* that Jesus had risen from the dead.
- VI. To produce a more detailed reconstruction of the events, one can make different assumptions which produce different scenarios with different problems. Here is a range of options:
  - A. Fundamentalist
    1. Assumption: The Bible is the inerrant word of God, since God would want us to have an absolutely reliable source of information about important matters of faith.

2. What took place: The resurrection events occurred exactly as the canonical accounts record. The seeming discrepancies can be harmonized and are in part due to selective reporting.

3. Problems:

a). It is difficult to harmonize many details in the canonical accounts, and heroic efforts to do so soon call into question the reliability of the narratives as a whole.

b). Is the inerrancy of the Bible the only way to receive certainty about important matters of faith? What about the guidance of the Holy Spirit and communal experience? The Catholic Church proclaimed that the doctrine of the bodily assumption of Mary into heaven was infallible on the basis of the consensus of the faithful, not the clear testimony of scripture.

c). And do Christians need certainty, as opposed to sufficient probability? Are people absolutely certain of anything? Perhaps absolute certainty belongs to God alone.

d). A theological danger of Fundamentalism is that it can easily turn the Bible into an idol, i.e., an external substitute for God, especially, the continuing guidance of the Holy Spirit.

#### B. Conservative Christian

1. Assumption: The biblical accounts of the resurrection are basically historically reliable, and God can work physical miracles.

2. What took place: The resurrection happened basically as the New Testament accounts say and included the miraculous removal of Jesus's body from the tomb.

3. Problems:

a. If God can work physical miracles, why do we not see more of them when they are so desperately needed?

b. What happened to Jesus's body, and where is it now?

#### C. Liberal Christian

1. Assumption: The Bible contains a lot of legendary and purely literary material but does point to supernatural truth. God cannot work physical miracles and certainly does not raise dead bodies. Nevertheless, God does have objective existence and does raise the "souls" of the dead.

2. What took place: God raised and glorified the "soul" of Jesus and gave the disciples objective visions attesting this act.

3. Problems:

a. The gospel texts clearly claim that the tomb was empty and that when Jesus appeared, he still had a body.

b. If the "resurrection" of Jesus does not differ fundamentally from the resurrection of everyone else, what evidence is there for the divinity of Christ? How could monotheistic followers of Jesus have ever come to the conclusion that he was God?

c. Even today things that appear to be physical miracles (e.g., sudden healings under religious circumstances) still occasionally occur.

#### D. Radical Christian



1. Assumption: The Bible contains a lot of myth which needs to be demythologized. Christianity has to do only with this earthly life.
2. What took place: After the crucifixion the followers of Jesus came to the realization that his cause was not lost (Willi Marxsen). Because of their mythological world view, they either experienced this realization as a vision of Jesus raised from the dead or else chose to talk about it in this symbolic way.
3. Problems:
  - a. Is the common-sense notion that we can still work for the “cause” of Jesus sufficient grounds for Christian hope? Every individual dies, and after two thousand years of Christians working to realize Jesus’s vision, the world is still in a mess.
  - b. The Church always taught that faith in life after death was central to Christianity (already 1 Cor. 15:14-19).
  - c. Due to recent medical advances, out-of-body near-death experiences have become common and seem to confirm that there is life after death.

#### E. Sympathetic non-Christian

1. Assumption: Christianity is basically erroneous but contains useful perspectives and is worthy of respect.
2. What took place: Belief in the resurrection began as an honest mistake due to an error involving the tomb and/or a series of subjective visions, perhaps resulting from grief, guilt (for having abandoned Jesus), wishful thinking, and fear of a future without Jesus.
3. Problem: Could people have come to the wild conclusion that someone rose from the grave on the basis of an honest mistake? Has a similar mistake ever been made?

#### F. Hostile non-Christian

1. Assumption: Christianity is a dangerous fraud.
2. What took place: Jesus or his followers deliberately perpetuated a hoax.
3. Problems:
  - a. How could Jesus have perpetrated a hoax? How did he survive the crucifixion, since it was the responsibility of the executioners to ensure that he was dead? And if he somehow did survive, he would have been in terrible medical condition.
  - b. If the disciples knew that they were proclaiming a lie, how could they have gotten anyone to believe a story that sounded completely crazy?
  - c. Christianity has in practice been far from perfect, but surely it is going too far to say that it is merely a dangerous fraud.

G. Hybrids: One can combine elements from the various positions noted above to produce a hybrid, such as the resurrection of Jesus was a hoax, but nevertheless Christianity is a good thing. But combining the positions does not eliminate the problems, since each position has them.

H. Of course, one can take the position that today we cannot know what led to the claim that Jesus rose from the dead. But it is only responsible to resort to this

position after one has made a thorough examination of the issues and the evidence. An informed agnosticism about a crucial issue may be responsible, an uninformed agnosticism about a crucial issue is not.

(time permitting) Discussion: What assumptions do you make, and what do you think happened on the first Easter? And how do you deal with the problems listed above for your position? Or do you have a position that is not listed and analyzed above, and if so, what is it and what are its underlying assumptions?

Warning: Most people base their fundamental perspectives not on evidence but on taste (Charles Peirce).

## Conference 2: My Own Assumptions that I Bring to the Resurrection Texts

I. Assumption 1: The New Testament does contain errors but should be given the benefit of the doubt. Below we will carefully test the biblical witness to the resurrection and see that the basic claims seem to be historically accurate.

II. Assumption 2: The divergences in the resurrection accounts are due to three factors:

A. Faulty memory and reconstruction (including apologetic reconstruction). An illustration of faulty memory is the variation in the names and number of Mary Magdalene's companions in the synoptic gospels (Matt. 28:1, Mark 16:1, Luke 24:10). Note: I believe that John eliminates the companions to make the narrative simpler.

Two illustrations of apologetic reconstruction:

1. Matthew's tradition that the tomb of Jesus was guarded.
  - a. Matthew makes clear that, when he wrote, the enemies of the Church were saying that the disciples of Jesus stole the body and proclaimed that he had risen from the dead (Matt. 27:62-66, 28:11-15).
  - b. Matthew (and probably his community) had to respond by explaining where this allegation came from and why it could not be true.
  - c. The response is that
    - 1). Because the tomb was guarded, the disciples could not have stolen the body.
    - 2). After the guards reported that Jesus rose from the dead, the fearful authorities bribed the guards to spread the fiction that the disciples stole the body of Jesus.
  - d). Since a guard at the tomb would have strengthened the claim in Mark, Luke, and John that Jesus rose from the dead, and yet they record nothing about one, it seems unlikely that historically the tomb was guarded.
2. The tradition that Mary Magdalene on Easter morning saw an angel.
  - a. In both Matthew and John, Mary Magdalene first sees one or two angels and then sees the risen Jesus.
  - b. While I hesitate to limit how God chooses to make revelations, it does seem strange that it was necessary to have an angel appear prior to having Jesus himself appear. It is especially strange that the angel in Matthew tells Mary Magdalene to proclaim the resurrection even though Jesus has not yet appeared to her and is still going to do so (Matt. 28:7-8).
  - c. I would suggest that Mary Magdalene (and her companions?) saw Jesus, that this was the first appearance of the risen Christ, and that Mary Magdalene reported this startling event to other disciples. I suspect that Luke is correct that initially the male disciples did not believe her (Luke 24:10-11).
    - 1). In the gospels the divine messenger tells Mary to proclaim the resurrection to the disciples, and this command implies that they do not yet know about the resurrection.

2). The tradition that Jesus rose on the first day of the week (i.e., very shortly after the crucifixion) is only associated with Mary Magdalene and her companions.

3). The testimony of women was not considered reliable in first-century Judaism. Women could not testify in court.

4). Therefore, the disciples did not believe the women's testimony, as Luke explicitly states (Luke 24:10-11).

5). Later, when the male disciples came to faith on the basis of subsequent appearances, the fact that Mary Magdalene was the first witness to the resurrection undermined the credibility of the resurrection proclamation. Note that the official list of witnesses as recorded in 1 Corinthians 15:3-7 only lists males.

6). At least part of the Church downplayed Mary Magdalene's testimony by saying

a). She did not see Jesus himself but only an angel.

b). She could not have been the origin of the tradition that Jesus rose from the dead, since even though an angel told her that Jesus was alive, she was too disoriented to share the message (Mark 16:7-8).

d. If the above analysis is historically accurate, I would nominate Mary Magdalene to be the patroness of that never-ending chain of women whose contributions to the Church were not fully acknowledged.

B. Theological and literary editing also has contributed to the discrepancies between resurrection texts or even the invention of some appearances. Two illustrations:

1. John's claim that Mary Magdalene came to the tomb "while it was still dark" (20:1) is literary not historical.

a. Historically, it is unlikely that Mary Magdalene would have gone to a tomb when it was dark, and the other gospels record that she came when there was light.

b. Apologetically, Mary seeing the empty tomb when there was darkness casts doubt on the reliability of her testimony.

c. Throughout John's Gospel darkness and night are literary symbols of spiritual ignorance and alienation from God. Note, e.g., 1:4-5, 8:12, 9:39, 13:30.

d. In John's Gospel when Mary Magdalene sees the empty tomb, she assumes that the body has been stolen.

e. Hence, she is in spiritual darkness, and John uses the physical darkness of the scene to symbolize her state.

2. The story of the trip to Emmaus may be only a Eucharistic meditation on the resurrection (Luke 24:13-35).

a. This particular story only occurs in Luke, and it cannot be any of the appearances listed in 1 Corinthians 15:5-8.

b. The story is thoroughly Eucharistic.

- 1). The climax of the story is Christ being known in the breaking of the bread.
- 2). And earlier in the story we almost have a “ministry of the word” with Christ interpreting the scriptures.
- c. Therefore, it is quite plausible that the story arose as a Eucharistic meditation on the historical fact that at least one of the resurrection appearances occurred when the disciples were eating together (Acts 10:41) and that subsequently disciples experienced the presence of Jesus during Eucharistic celebrations.
3. I strongly suspect that different "translations" into earthly terms of experiences that were essentially unlike normal experience also led to discrepancies in the resurrection accounts.
  - a. Since the appearances led to the claim that Jesus had risen and become Lord of the Universe and no analogous claim seems to exist, it seems logical that the appearances were also utterly different from any other experience.
  - b. Things which are unique cannot be described literally, since language is based on common experience.
  - c. However, unique experiences can be partially translated into terms which people who have not had the experience can understand, and very different translations are possible. One could say to a blind person that shocking pink is like the taste of a hot pepper or like the blast of an electric guitar.
  - d. I believe that the details of the resurrection appearances (e.g., what Jesus said) are at least often translations of the convictions that originated in the appearances.

III. Assumption 3: Thanks to critical scholarship we can to some extent separate early and late traditions in the New Testament. At the very least, traditions which appear in a document are as old as the document.

IV. Assumption 4: God does work miracles, but miracles are only ambiguous signs which are intended to invite faith, not replace it. Here by “faith” I mean the knowledge and trust that arise primarily from an individual or communal relationship with God.

A. Note that in the gospels Jesus sometimes

1. Declares that his miracles are signs of the truth of his larger message (e.g., Matt. 11:5-6).
2. Refuses to work a miracle when there is no faith already (e.g., Mark 8:11-12, John 4:46-50).

B. Consequently, I reject on theological grounds both claims by some Christians that the objective historical evidence proves beyond doubt that Christ rose from the dead and claims by skeptics that Jesus should have appeared to his enemies to give undeniable proof of his resurrection.

V. Assumption 5: God often gives miraculous signs (whether small or great) to help beginning Christians have an initial faith and then invites Christians to grow into a mature faith that does not depend on miracles. Indeed, a mature faith based on a relationship with God can become strong evidence that God can work miracles when appropriate. I believe that the organization of John’s Gospel underlines the transition

from a faith based primarily on miracles to a faith based primarily on the presence of Jesus known through love.

A. In the earlier part of John, miraculous signs lead people to faith who are open to it (e.g., John 2:1-11). Note that in John's Gospel no sign, no matter how great, will lead people to faith who are closed to it (e.g., John 9).

B. In the later chapters of John Jesus insists that if the disciples love one another, Jesus will dwell in them and they will know him as divine (14:18-23).

VI. Assumption 6: The energy that comes from the presence of the Holy Spirit is imparted by the Spirit herself and is not (exclusively) a subjective enthusiasm in believers. I base this assumption on my own prayer experience.

VII. Assumption 7: Accordingly, at most, historical research can make belief in the resurrection more plausible. A secure faith must have additional support from elsewhere.

(time permitting) Discussion: How do you feel about my assumptions?

Suggested reading: Matthew 28, Mark 16, Luke 24, John 20-21, 1 Corinthians 15.

### Conference 3: The Historical Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus, One Evaluation

I. One historical reconstruction of what "objectively" took place. (By "objective" I mean what someone at the scene could have observed regardless of their religious beliefs.)

A. Mary Magdalene and probably one or more other women discovered that the tomb in which Jesus had been placed was empty.

1. It has often been claimed that the story of the finding of the empty tomb is an apologetic legend which was probably late. This claim has some basis and is at least *possible*.

a. 1 Corinthians 15, which is our earliest written presentation of the resurrection and is a quarter of a century later, does not mention the empty tomb.

b. A late story about people finding the empty tomb could easily have arisen, especially if the grave's location was forgotten. The apocryphal Gospel of Peter demonstrates the apologetic creativity of the early Church. Moreover, since the Romans did not usually return the bodies of executed criminals and Mary Magdalene was a visitor to Jerusalem, it is conceivable that the burial site was lost.

2. Nevertheless, it seems to me that the preponderance of the historical evidence makes it *likely* that the tomb was empty, regardless of how we may explain this unsettling fact.

a. Little can be deduced from the silence of 1 Corinthians 15, particularly since "was buried" and "was raised" (1 Cor. 15:4a) may actually imply knowledge of the empty tomb and does imply faith in the physical resurrection of Jesus.

b. There are signs that the story of the tomb's discovery was early and widespread. The gospels of Mark and John have independent versions, and in both there is evidence of editing, and so apparently the evangelists reworked older material (Reginald Fuller).

c. It is not likely that the location of the tomb was forgotten, because the gospel accounts of the burial and discovery are basically credible.

1). The burial of Jesus by Joseph of Arimathea appears to be historical. If the Church had not known who buried Jesus, it would not have claimed that it was someone who

a). Came from an obscure town.

b). Actually belonged to the circles who demanded Jesus's execution. The gospels freely admit that Joseph was a member of the Sanhedrin (Jerusalem Council; Mark 15:43, Luke 23:50-51) which condemned Jesus and petitioned Pilate for his execution (Mark :14:53-64, 15:1; Luke 22:66-23:22).

c). There is evidence that the Romans did sometimes return crucified bodies. A crucified corpse in a family tomb has actually been found.

- 2). Joseph could scarcely have forgotten where he buried Jesus and certainly would have been able to verify that the body of Jesus was still there (if such had been the case).
- 3). It is historically likely that Mary Magdalene (and her companions?) knew the location of the tomb. It was the solemn obligation of family and friends to give the deceased an honorable burial. Therefore, it is historically likely that the women would have
  - a). Witnessed the crucifixion,
  - b). And seen where the body was put, as the gospels record (e.g., Mark 15:40, 47).
  - d. It is most improbable that a late apologetic legend would have attributed the finding of the empty tomb to women, since in first century Judaism the testimony of women was considered unreliable. Women could not testify in court.
  - e. Of course, we could be dealing with an early apologetic legend about an empty tomb, a legend which originated at a time when it was still known that only the women remained in Jerusalem. Nevertheless, this hypothesis faces severe difficulties.
    - 1). Such a legend would have begun and circulated when Mary Magdalene and her companions were alive and knew it was false.
    - 2). There is no evidence that the males fled from *Jerusalem*. Both Luke and John specifically state that the males were still in the city on Easter (e.g., Luke 24:33), and Matthew and Mark implicitly assume the same, since the women must tell the men to go to Galilee for a resurrection appearance (e.g., Mark 16:7).
3. A natural explanation for the tomb becoming empty is conceivable but not plausible.
  - a. It is conceivable that someone removed the body (e.g., the disciples stole the body and said that Jesus had risen from the dead [Matt. 28:12-15]).
  - b. But such explanations seem most unlikely.
    - 1). The disciples seem to have fled and gone into hiding; would they then have stolen the body?
    - 2). What possible reason would anyone else have had to remove the body?
    - 3). The removal would have taken place either on the Sabbath when such strenuous activity was forbidden and highly noticeable or after the Sabbath when it was dark.
- B. Certain disciples “saw” something which convinced them Jesus was alive, and there are problems with dismissing these experiences as subjective visions.
  1. Given what Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 15:4-8, it seems to me virtually certain that many early disciples saw something which they perceived to be Jesus risen from the dead.



2. It is *possible* that all they saw were subjective visions resulting from trauma and wishful thinking.
3. Nevertheless, there are difficulties with the assumption that we are dealing with subjective visions.
  - a. In Jewish tradition there was no precedent to enable people to imagine the bodily resurrection of an individual before the end of the world.
  - b. The normal way to console oneself over the death of a martyr was to look for God to punish those responsible and perhaps to reward the martyr on the Last Day.
  - c. An empty tomb does not normally lead to visions of a resurrection. Note Mary Magdalene's response to the empty tomb in John 20:1-2.
  - d. The accounts of the resurrection appearances stress that those who witnessed them were initially incredulous, sometimes so much so that at first they did not even recognize Jesus.
  - e. Jesus had taught his disciples the danger of hypocrisy and the need for discernment, and we may question whether his followers would have easily been deceived by a subjective experience.
  - f. None of the accounts of the resurrection appearances tells us that the followers of Jesus were having an "inner" experience. Instead, our sources claim that in a number of resurrection encounters more than one person was present and Jesus was somehow visible to everyone. Moreover, it is noteworthy that elsewhere Matthew is enthusiastic about dreams and elsewhere Luke is enthusiastic about visions, but neither evangelist suggests that the resurrection experiences were dreams or visions.

C. After the resurrection there was a continuing experience of the presence of Jesus's Spirit.

1. After the resurrection appearances ended, the people who had them continued to experience the presence of Jesus, but in a less dramatic and tangible way.
2. Disciples who did not have an appearance could also experience this presence.
3. The experience of Jesus being present reinforced faith in his resurrection, since if Jesus was present, he could not still be dead.
4. Consequently, various New Testament texts connect the resurrection appearances with the gift of the Holy Spirit. When Jesus appears, he either gives the Holy Spirit (John 20:19-23) or promises that he will do so soon (Luke 24:49).
5. Depending on one's understanding of what the experience of the Holy Spirit is, the presence of the Spirit can support any of the various Christian positions on the resurrection enumerated in the first presentation.

D. By contrast, it is likely that the resurrection accounts that stress the undeniable physical presence of Jesus (the risen Jesus eating a piece of fish [Luke 24:41-43], Jesus challenging Thomas to put a finger into the nail wounds [John 20:24-29]) are not historical in the strict sense.

1. Such stories appear only in individual late works.
2. If such events had actually occurred, their absence in the earlier tradition would be hard to explain.
3. It is easier to explain their origin in terms of apologetic and theological interests. The Church had to reply to Jewish allegations that the disciples stole the corpse (Matt. 27:62-66) and perhaps radical Christian allegations that Christ did not have a body (e.g., 2 John 7).
4. The tradition of apologetic and theological elaboration continued after the New Testament was written, as we can see from the Gospel of Peter.
5. Such stories may be valid interpretations of the significance of the resurrection or even valid translations into earthly terms of experiences which differed fundamentally from normal reality. The presence of the risen Christ was so tangible that it was as if he could have eaten something or someone could have felt his wounds.

II. Given my methodological assumptions (see above), I conclude that the most *probable* explanation for the historical evidence is that Jesus physically rose from the dead and appeared to his disciples.

III. An attempt to reply to the problems of my position.

A. As we saw, there are two major objections to the “conservative” Christian position which I hold as the most likely:

1. Concern about what happened to Jesus’s body.
2. If God can work physical miracles, why do we not see more of them, since often they are so desperately needed?

B. In reply, I would venture

1. By definition, a miracle is something that we cannot fully explain by natural causation and must be due to some special act of God.
2. Therefore, to ask for a complete natural explanation of what happened to Jesus’s body is implicitly to return to the assumption that God cannot work miracles, an assumption that I do not make.
3. In response to the question of what God might have done with the body, I would speculate that God transformed the corpse of Jesus into a “spiritual” body (i.e., a body consisting of energy rather than matter). This spiritual body appeared to the disciples and entered into heaven (cf. 1 Cor. 15).

- a). Naturally, we do not know what happened to the body.
- b). 1 Corinthians 15 stresses that
  - 1). Paul experienced the risen Christ and knew other people who did.
  - 2). There are natural bodies and spiritual ones.
  - 3). Jesus became a life-giving spirit.
- c). The word “spirit” in Hebrew and in Greek means wind, that is an invisible force.
- d). In nature caterpillars become butterflies, and mass can turn into energy and radiate to somewhere else!
- e). A body consisting of energy would explain the otherwise puzzling fact that in the accounts of several resurrection

appearances the disciples do not initially recognize Jesus but subsequently do so.

4. The resurrection did not involve God saving Jesus from suffering and death, but saving Jesus after his faithfulness in accepting suffering and death.

5. Consequently, the resurrection challenges us in earthly tragedies to focus on final salvation rather than expect God to fix the situation here and now with a miracle.

(time permitting) Discussion: How do you feel about my position that the most probable explanation for the historical evidence is that Jesus physically rose from the dead?

## **Conference 4: The Theological and Spiritual Evidence for the Early Church's Understanding of the Resurrection**

- I. (review) In my opinion, the historical evidence concerning Jesus's resurrection invites belief but does not compel it. The historical evidence makes it implausible that the disciples made a mistake, but not impossible.
- II. Christians are left with the question of whether we can confidently believe in the resurrection, and if so, how?
- III. Let us now briefly review the historical evidence and consider in detail the theological and spiritual evidence for the resurrection.
- IV. The New Testament suggests there are at least four bases for belief in Jesus's resurrection:
  - A. The testimony concerning the empty tomb.
  - B. The "appearances" to the first disciples. Note that the New Testament stresses that these were privileged encounters (e.g., Acts 10:41) which have ceased (e.g., 1 Cor. 15:5-8).
  - C. The continuing presence of the Spirit of the risen Christ.
  - D. The eschatological hope that the resurrection inspires, namely that those who are faithful to Jesus will also rise from the dead and share in his glory (e.g., 1 Cor. 15:12-14).
- V. There are objections that can be raised against each of these.
  - A. The empty tomb
    1. (review) Historically, the story could conceivably be an apologetic legend. Note: I do not think that theories which hypothesize either a mistake or a plot to explain the empty tomb are historically plausible.
    2. Theologically, there are two problems which we have not yet discussed:
      - a. The empty tomb could be seen to imply that Christ's resurrection was merely a resuscitation in which Jesus returned to earthly life.
      - b. The empty tomb has traditionally been seen to imply our fleshly resurrection at the end of time, and this implication is troubling.
        - 1). The main Christian tradition has also taught the resurrection of the self ("soul") at the moment of death, and contemporary out-of-body experiences seem to confirm this.
        - 2). The resurrection of the flesh raises various problems. Can cannibals be raised? Can we achieve final fulfillment in limited bodies? It must, however, be added that traditional theology also taught that after the fleshly resurrection of our present bodies, our bodies would be changed into a more glorious form (1 Cor. 15).
  - B. The first disciples could conceivably have been deceived by subjective experiences, since the disciples were burdened with grief and guilt (for having abandoned Jesus) and uncertainty about their future.
  - C. The Spirit which Christians experience today might be something other than the presence of the risen Christ. Any gathering has a "spirit," and this spirit often reflects the values and beliefs of the group in question.
  - D. The hope that the resurrection inspires could merely be unfounded optimism ("pie in the sky when you die").

VI. In my opinion, the weakest proof of the resurrection is the empty tomb, and Christian faith cannot principally rest on it.

VII. Nevertheless, we can strengthen the testimony of the empty tomb if we take the position that the tomb is a special, miraculous *sign* of a transcendent event, Jesus leaving the created world and returning to the Father.

A. Such a position does not necessarily commit us to a resuscitation of Jesus or a fleshly resurrection of Christians.

B. It is apparently the theology of the evangelists, since in the gospels people do not come to faith primarily on the basis of the tomb, and in 1 Corinthians 15 Paul does not even appeal to the empty tomb when challenging the readers to believe.

C. Jesus taught that his miracles were signs of the larger reality of God's lordship (e.g., Luke 11:20).

D. John's Gospel explicitly calls the resurrection a "sign" (20:30), and in John signs are miraculous events which point beyond themselves to larger truths.

VIII. To determine whether we are merely dealing with subjective visions, we have to assess the spiritual content of what the disciples saw. Note that the Christian tradition has insisted that there are ways of unmasking "false" visions, and even common sense suggests that some visions must be only subjective.

IX. To a remarkable degree the New Testament accounts of the resurrection appearances have a common structure (Charles Perry). The structure:

A. A presence which initially could be doubted and/or misinterpreted but which in time produced a lasting conviction that Jesus was actually there.

B. A command to share the message.

C. Some kind of promise--a promise that was fulfilled when the message was shared.

We may note in passing that here we have another illustration that experiencing the risen Jesus was like experiencing God (cf. Exodus 3:1-12).

X. It seems to me that this common structure in the accounts must basically have been in the actual experiences.

XI. It is up to us on the basis of our own growing spiritual insight to determine whether such an experience could arise from a subjective vision. Typically, in subjective visions the experience initially seems real to us, but later we begin to question it.

XII. The literary structure of the resurrection accounts suggests that one way to determine whether the experiences were genuine is to act on them ourselves and see if Jesus fulfills his promise to be faithful to those who believe and obey.

XIII. To determine whether the Spirit in the midst of Christian communities today is (at least sometimes?) the Spirit of the risen Christ, we must do three things (Peter Carnley):

A. Determine what the "Spirit of Jesus" is by studying the historical human being. Note, for example, that Jesus was compassionate toward people in need, demanding of his disciples but bore with their failures, impatient with hypocrisy in religious leaders, obedient to God.

B. Learn to perceive what the Spirit in contemporary Christian communities is, including whether something more is present than just shared belief and commitment.

C. Ask whether the spirit that is "objectively" present is the Spirit of Jesus.

D. I would add: Be ready to receive the Spirit ourselves. I think that most people who sincerely believe in the resurrection do so because Christ's Spirit has come to them. By the "Spirit" the Bible means

1. A divine energy. The biblical words for "spirit" literally mean wind.
2. Something that changes our way of thinking and perceiving so that we see the world more like the way that God does. Paul calls the Spirit "the mind of Christ"(1 Cor. 2:16).

XIV. To determine whether the eschatological hope that the resurrection inspires is more than misplaced optimism, we must note precisely what the hope is and whether it corresponds to our fundamental needs as human beings.

A. In my opinion, a hope which corresponds to basic, universal human need is realizable, since otherwise the need is inexplicable.

B. The hope that the resurrection inspires is our entry into the fullness of God's love and glory by means of accepting Christ's message. Of course, part of that fullness is eternal life.

C. Accordingly, we must ask at least the following:

1. Do we as human beings need ultimately to share in the fullness of God's love and glory, or can we be completely satisfied with less? Would we be fully satisfied with a God who forever withheld something from us that he could give us?
2. Do we need to get to this consummation by imitating Christ's example of self-sacrificing love, or would we be satisfied with some other route?
3. Do we instinctively feel that we can only come to share fully in God's life if he shared fully in ours? Would we be comfortable with a God who demands that we experience debilitating suffering and death when God himself never did? Does the faith that God had a human life and is, therefore, our brother/sister, as well as our Lord and Creator, invite us into a richer relationship with God?
4. Can we affirm on the basis of our own experience the Church's witness and continuing experience that through Christ Christians in earthly life already have the "down payment" (2 Cor. 1:22, 5:5) of the final consummation? Have we felt the power of God lifting us up, and does the power that we have experienced point backward to the power that raised Jesus and forward to the power which will give us life after death? Note that St. Paul believed that Christian life is a series of deaths and resurrections.

a. In his own life Paul repeatedly felt that he was all but dead and that the power of God raised him from the dead (2 Cor. 1:8-11, 11:23-30).

b. Paul insisted that in baptism Christians share in the death of Jesus and enter a new life sustained by the Spirit (Rom. 6:3-11).

XV. Because of my answers to the questions listed above, I feel certain that Jesus did rise from the dead.

A. The empty tomb and the resurrection appearances led to Christian faith, and that faith makes so much sense of life as a whole.

B. Therefore, it is entirely reasonable that God would have provided the resurrection as a special sign.

(time permitting) Discussion: But how do you answer these questions, and do you feel certain that Jesus rose from the dead?

## **Conference 5: Can We Affirm Our Own Future Resurrection from the Dead, and Is This Affirmation Consistent with the Resurrection of Jesus?**

- I. In the earlier books of the Old Testament there is no belief in life after death for individuals.
- A. The assumption was that the mind and the body were inseparable.
  - B. Therefore, after death as the body obviously decayed, the mind decayed also, and consciousness faded.
- II. Later in response to new historical and philosophical developments there arose two competing understandings of meaningful life after death in Judaism.
- A. The mainline Jewish one was resurrection of the body at the Day of Judgment and arose to justify martyrdom, especially during the persecution by Antiochus Epiphanes. This understanding appears in Daniel and 2 Maccabees which deal with that persecution.
    - 1. God would raise the bodies of the dead from their graves and pass sentence on everyone.
    - 2. God would also transform the earth into paradise.
    - 3. The righteous would reign on a renewed earth.
    - 4. The wicked would suffer elsewhere, perhaps underground.
    - 5. Of course, if the mind and the body are inseparable, all of this can happen only at a general resurrection in the future. At present the bodies of the martyrs are dead and decayed.
  - B. An alternative picture was that at an individual's death the spirit would leave the body and go to God for judgment, with the righteous going to heaven and the wicked to hell. This view especially appears in books like 4 Maccabees and the writings of Philo which show the influence of Greek philosophy.
- III. A compromise position which may have existed already in the time of Jesus (N.T. Wright) and which the Church certainly adopted later was a two-stage life after death.
- A. At an individual's death the soul went to judgment and temporarily ended up in heaven or hell.
  - B. On the Day of Judgment, God would raise the bodies of the dead, reunite the bodies with their souls, and transform the earth into paradise where the righteous would now live.
  - C. Perhaps Jesus himself believed in this compromise position, since there are sayings which presuppose both individual judgment at death (Luke 16:19-31) and resurrection on the Day of Judgment (e.g., Matt. 11:20-24). However, since Jesus was not a systematic thinker and taught in images, he may only have believed that there was life after death and left the details up to God.
  - D. In any case, it is clear that subsequently, the Church adopted the compromise position which combined both the resurrection of the soul at death and the resurrection (and transformation) of the body on the Day of Judgment. The Day of Judgment would occur when Christ returned in glory to the Earth.
- IV. There were obvious problems with these various beliefs, even if the problems were not always faced.
- A. Since human bodies decomposed and, in some cases, even got recycled into other bodies, the resurrection of the body was hard to imagine and sometimes bordered on being logically impossible.



- B. The departure of the soul from the body at death presupposed that
1. Human beings during earthly life were composed of a material, corruptible body and an immaterial, immortal soul.
  2. But it was never clear how these two very different things could work together.
  3. There was little evidence that an immortal soul even existed, especially since a sick body impacted spiritual functions.
  4. The dualism of body and soul denigrated the body and the material world and, especially, sex. Note that sex is the physical act that most influences our “spirits.”
- C. The combination of the soul going to judgment and temporarily being in heaven or hell and then being reunited with an earthly body was complicated and implied that the dead in heaven lacked final fulfillment.
- V. In modern times several things have occurred that raise further questions of whether resurrection of the body on the Day of Judgment is credible.
- A. N.T. Wright has argued persuasively (at least to me) that when Jesus was predicting the triumphant return of the “Son of Humanity/Man,” he was predicting the triumph of the new Israel, not his personal return. Unfortunately, the problem of what Jesus meant when he talked about the “Son of Humanity” is difficult and controversial. But here is my opinion.
1. The normal meaning of “Son of Humanity” is clear: son of humanity means a human being.
  2. It also is clear that Jesus frequently talked about the son of humanity in reference to himself.
  3. I believe that he saw himself as the prototype of a new spirit-filled humanity. Note such sayings as Mark 2:10, 2:27-28; Matt. 11:11.
  4. Jesus also saw himself as the founder of a new Israel which would grow to include humanity as a whole. Note the choice of the 12.
  5. Daniel 7 personifies the renewed Israel as a “Son of Humanity.”
  6. Therefore, when Jesus talked about the triumphant return of the Son of Humanity, he was not talking about his personal return on some future day, but the triumph of a renewed Israel.
  7. I believe that the subsequent spread of Christianity fulfilled Jesus’s hope in part. However, it is not clear to me that Christians have behaved better on average than other people.
  8. Of course, after the resurrection the Church (mistakenly) assumed that when Jesus talked about the return of the Son of Humanity, he was predicting his own second coming. This belief built on the older Jewish faith that Elijah would return to usher in the messianic age (Malachi 3:23-24), and the Christian faith that Elijah had in some sense returned in the form of John the Baptist (e.g., Matt. 11:13-14).
- B. The Day of Judgment which the early Church felt was near has delayed for two thousand years.
- C. Scientists have discovered that the universe is nearly fourteen billion years old with an unimaginable number of planets, some of which could contain intelligent life.
- D. Life on earth has evolved for eons.

E. Therefore, to believe in a final resurrection of the body, one must believe that God will intervene on one planet and

1. End billions of years of geological and biological evolution
2. Somehow restore life to bodies which have decayed and been recycled, even recycled into other human beings!

F. In response to such problems mainline Christian denominations have increasingly stressed judgment at the moment of death and downplayed waiting for Christ's triumphant return to earth to raise the dead.

G. Meanwhile, marginal Christian groups have kept predicting the imminent return of Christ, and these predictions have always been at least premature and have weakened Christian faith in people who believed them.

H. For what it is worth, I think that it is now time for the Church to admit that bodily resurrection on some future day is no longer plausible (if it ever was).

VI. By contrast, several things have happened which make the resurrection of the self at the moment of death and some sort of judgment highly likely even without any religious evidence.

A. We now know that the self is a complex electronic pattern produced by the firing of nerve endings and that in the present life the body sustains the pattern.

B. Thanks to computer technology, we know that a complex electronic pattern containing human thoughts and emotions can be sent wirelessly into another place. One example of the process is called e-mail.

C. Thanks to advances in medicine, it is now often possible to revive people who were clinically dead, and we now have numerous reports of near-death, out-of-body experiences. People report

1. When their bodily functions ceased, they left their body.
2. They soon went through a "tunnel."
3. On the other side they met their departed friends and relatives.
4. The deceased were then interviewed by a "Being of Light" who showed them all that they ever did and how their good deeds benefited others and their evil deeds harmed others. The deceased were proud of their good deeds and ashamed of their evil ones.
5. Then thanks to the advances of modern medicine, the deceased were able to return to their bodies and earthly life.
6. The deceased are almost always certain that their out-of-body experiences were accurate and not hallucinations.
7. And at least in some cases people learned things when clinically dead that subsequently have turned out to be verifiable.

D. On the basis of such information it seems very likely that at death the body, so to speak, punches the send button, the "spirit" (i.e., the electronic pattern) leaves the body and goes to another realm and faces judgment by God.

E. Of course, religious experience confirms this conclusion and is what the Church always taught. We experience that God gives to us new energy (during prayer, for example), and the Church has always taught that God who empowers us here raises us to new life when we die.

VII. If one likes, one can argue that this new understanding of life after death at least partially vindicates the older compromise of the departure of the soul at death and a

subsequent bodily resurrection, since an electronic pattern has similarities to both a body (an energy field is something physical) and a soul (an energy field is not matter). VIII. This new understanding of life after death is compatible with the bodily resurrection of Jesus if the bodily resurrection of Jesus is a special sign of his divinity and that there is life after death, rather than an exact model for our future resurrection. The theology that the bodily resurrection of Jesus was a special “sign” already appears in John’s Gospel (20:30).