

I BELIEVE IN THE RESURRECTION BECAUSE ...

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on April 10, 1966 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

The most important issue in the realm of religion today is the issue of faith. In the enlightened, fast-moving 20th century can modern man still believe in a personal God who created the universe and who is concerned about him individually? Can modern man still believe in the divinity of Christ? Can modern man still believe in the inspiration and authority of the Bible? Much is being written and much is being said concerning the matter of faith. Leading national magazines are featuring stories on the existence of God. Religious leaders are proclaiming their doubts. Nothing is more crucial and no issue is more alive than the issue of faith.

At this season of the year when millions of people throughout the world are thinking and talking about the resurrection of Christ, it seems appropriate to point out that the resurrection of Christ is the keystone in the whole arch of Christian faith. Although most of us are only remotely aware of the techniques of masonry, I think all of us at sometime or other have seen the importance of the keystone in a brick or stone archway. The columns of brick or stone on each reach upward gradually until both columns join at the central stone, with each column leaning, in part, upon this central stone. When the keystone is removed the arch falls. The resurrection of Christ is the keystone in the whole arch of Christian faith. If Christ was raised from the dead he is unmistakably, undeniably divine. If he was not raised from the dead, he was only the greatest man. The resurrection is crucial.

Now, how can we know whether he was raised or not? The answer begins with the suggestion that we must use the same techniques in this area that we use in any other field to discover the facts concerning some alleged event of past history. Since we moderns were not there, we must depend upon the testimony of those who were there. Concerning these witnesses, we ask several questions. Were they men and women of honesty and integrity? Were they the kind of people whose characters would lead them to testify only that which was true? Were they mature and were they people of experience? Could they have been deceived or mistaken? Were they competent, in the sense of having an opportunity to observe and in the sense of having sound faculties with which to observe? When we go back to study the question of the resurrection we find that the witnesses were men and women of unquestionable character. They were mature, they were competent to observe, and they give every evidence of solidly believing their testimony.

We ask one additional question. Did they have some stake in the matter? By this we mean, did they have some advantage to be gained by testifying in one way or the other? To say it in still another way, did their testimony concerning the resurrection of Christ bring them some special benefit, which might cause the testimony to be suspect? The answer is that they, by testifying that Christ was raised from the dead, gave up their homes, possessions, families, and even their lives. Such testimony caused them to be considered enemies by the rulers of the Jews and made them laughing stocks among the Romans. They had, in a sense, "everything to lose" by their testimony, yet they gave this testimony just the same.

The Testimony of Those Who Were There

At this point we read accounts of the resurrection as given by those who were nearest to the event. "And when the sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, brought spices, that they might come and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, they come to the tomb when the sun was risen. And they were saying among themselves, Who shall roll us away the stone from the door of the tomb? And looking up, they see that the stone is rolled back: for it was exceeding great. And entering into the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, arrayed in a white robe; and they were amazed. And he saith unto them, Be not amazed: ye seek Jesus, the Nazarene, who hath, been crucified: he is risen; he is not here: behold, the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter, He goeth before you unto Galilee; there ye see him, as he said unto you. And they went out and fled from the tomb; for trembling and astonishment had come upon them: and they said nothing to anyone; for they were afraid. Now when he was risen early on the first day of the week he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons. She went and told them that had been with him, as they mourned and wept. And they, when they heard that he was alive, and had been seen of her, disbelieved." (Mark 16:1-11).

In addition, I should like for us to hear the testimony of John, who was himself an eye-witness. He described the scene with such detail as to indicate that he himself was there and even to indicate what happened in his own heart and mind as he observed the events. "Now on the first day of the week cometh Mary Magdalene early, while it was yet dark, unto the tomb, and seeth the stone taken away from the tomb. She runneth therefore, and cometh to Simon Peter, and to the other disciple whom Jesus loved, and saith unto them, They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb, and we know not where they have laid him. Peter therefore went forth, and the other disciple, and they went toward the tomb. And they ran both together: and the other disciple outran Peter, and came first to the tomb; and stooping and locking in, he seeth the linen cloths lying; yet entered he not in, Simon Peter therefore also cometh, following him, and entered into the tomb; and he beholdeth the linen cloths lying, and the napkin, that was upon his head, not lying with the linen cloths, but rolled up in a place by itself. Then entered in therefore the other disciple also, who came first to the tomb, and he saw, and believed. For as yet they knew not the scripture, that he must rise again from the dead. So the disciples went away again unto their own home." (John 20:1-10).

The Appearances

Immediately after the disciples found the tomb empty, Christ began his series of appearances to them. First, he appeared to certain women as they returned from the sepulcher. (Matt. 28: 1-10). Then, he appeared to Mary Magdalene at the sepulcher. (John 20:11-18, Mark 16:9-11). There was an appearance to the apostle Peter, before the evening of the day of the resurrection. (Luke 24:34; 1 Cor. 15: 5). Another appearance was to the two disciples, Cleopas and another, on the way to Emmaus. (Mark 16:12-13; Luke 24:13-35). Then, he appeared to the ten apostles, Thomas being absent. (Mark 16:14-15; Luke 24:36-40; John 20:19-23; 1 Cor. 15:5). One week later he appeared to all eleven of the apostles. (John 20:26-28). Next, he appeared to seven of the disciples at the Sea of Galilee, while they were fishing. (John 21:1-23). Then, he appeared to the apostles and about five thousand brethren at once, on a mountain in Galilee. (Matt. 28:16-20; 1 Cor. 15:6). There was an appearance to James, younger brother of the Lord and ultimately an elder of the church at Jerusalem. (1 Cor. 15:7). Finally, Christ appeared to the apostles at Jerusalem, on the Mount of Olives, immediately before the ascension. (Mark 16:19; Luke 24:50-52; Acts 1:3-8).

The kind of evidence which modern science is so insistent upon for determining the reality of any object under consideration, empirical evidence, is the kind of evidence that we have presented to us in the gospels regarding the resurrection of the Lord, namely, the things that are seen with the human eye, touched with the human hand, and heard with the human ear.

Prophecies

In the Old Testament there are several references to the fact that the "Messiah would be raised from the dead. One of these is found in Psalm 16:10, as follows, "For thou wilt not leave my soul to Sheol; neither wilt thou suffer thy holy one to see corruption." Later, this was quoted by the apostle Peter on Pentecost, and by the apostle Paul in the beginning of his first missionary journey, as fulfilled in the resurrection of Christ. (Acts 2:31 and 13:35).

Some days or weeks before the actual crucifixion Jesus told his disciples that he would die and be raised again. We find this in Matt. 12:40, as he says. "As Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the whale; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." Even plainer are his words as recorded in Matt. 16:21, "From that time began Jesus to show unto his disciples that he must go unto Jerusalem, and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and the third day be raised up." It is quite significant that Jesus could announce in advance exactly what would happen in regard to his death and resurrection.

In summation, we can say where, when, and why and how Christ died from the accounts in the gospels and Acts. We know who got his body and under what circumstances and where it was laid. We also have the following details concerning his resurrection. It took place on the first day of the week. It was first discovered by the women. The stone was rolled away when the woman arrived. Angels were present. Jesus appeared on at least eleven occasions and gave evidence of being the master of pre-crucifixion days, having a body and also miraculous power.

After the church began the apostles and others preached many things concerning Christ, but they emphasized nothing more than they emphasized the fact that he had been raised from the dead. The resurrection is woven into all of their preaching and was considered by them a very significant matter. The course of events of church history can be explained adequately only by the resurrection, The personal lives of the apostles, the spread of the church, and the preaching which was done all demand a resurrection.

H. D. A. Major, principal of Rippon Hall, Oxford University, and editor of the *Modern Church Man*, wrote, "Had the crucifixion of Jesus ended his disciples' experience of him, it is hard to see how the Christian church could have come into existence. That church was founded on faith in the Messiahship of Jesus. A crucified Messiah was no Messiah at all. He was one rejected by Judaism and cursed of God. It was the resurrection of Jesus as Paul declares in Romans 1:4, which proclaimed him to be the Son of God with power."

Two Primary Testimonies

There are two primary testimonies concerning the resurrection: the empty tomb and the appearances of Christ to his disciples. Skeptics have argued that the empty tomb can be explained away by several different means. Some have claimed that the body of Jesus was stolen by his disciples. We remember that the tomb was guarded by Roman guards and so might discount this charge. However, we would ask why the disciples should want to steal away the body. What advantage would there be? Had they stolen his body, why would they have been willing to die as martyrs for that which they knew was a hoax? Their behavior, in giving up their homes, goods and even their lives is an indication that they did not steal the body.

Some have argued that the body was removed by Joseph of Arimathea. Again, we ask, why? How would he be able to do it with a Roman guard about the tomb? How would he be able to keep his action from being known by other disciples? Incidentally, this objection is a relatively recent one, being made first in the 1800's. Others have argued that the women went to the wrong tomb,

finding an empty tomb near the true one, How is this possible? Did the angels also make a mistake? Did Peter and John run to the wrong tomb also?

Still others argue that Jesus did not really die but only fainted or swooned. Were the Romans so inept in their crucifixion that they failed to kill Jesus? If this were true they would have paid with their lives. We would further ask if Jesus did not die at this time, then when did he die and under what circumstances?

When we look at the other primary evidence of the resurrection, the appearances, we are impressed with the impact which these appearances had upon the disciples. After seeing Jesus die they went back to their places discouraged and even despondent. They came first to the tomb in unbelief. Only after they knew of the risen Lord did they believe. These men were honest men, competent men, and utterly sincere. After they had seen their Lord they were willing to stake their lives, their goods' and their reputations upon his resurrection. Many of them did, in fact, become martyrs for their faith in Christ.

In summation, I would quote from Dr. Howard A. Kelly, of Johns Hopkins University, in his book *A Scientific Man and the Bible*, in which he says, "Clear evidences of the resurrection are: The fact that it was utterly unexpected by the disciples and that their astonishment was great. (Luke 24:4). It is constantly certified by the disciples who saw and companied with our Lord after his resurrection. (Acts). By the evidence of his power over death (during his earthly life). By the transformation wrought in his disciples once assured of it and receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit. By his eating and drinking with them after rising from the dead. (Luke 24:41; John 21:13; Acts 10:41). By the blessed results flowing out over the world through the following centuries."

Conclusion

Every man must make a decision concerning Christ, God and the Bible. The evidence lies on the side of faith. If a man does not believe in Christ, then, of course, he cannot become a Christian. But, on the other hand, if he does believe in Christ he must do something about it. There is no defense for one's believing in the divinity of the Lord and yet not responding to the Lord's call. This leads us, then, to urge everyone who is a believer in the resurrection of Jesus to accept the invitation of their divine Lord to come to salvation. Believe on the Lord with all of your heart, repent of your sins, confess the name of Jesus before men, and be buried with your Lord in baptism. Then, live and work to help others find the way toward eternal life through faith in Christ.