

THE GREATEST MIRACLE

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on April 14, 1963 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

Throughout the world wherever the Jewish religion is practiced this past week has been Passover Week. Since the time of Moses, almost 3500 years ago, the Jews have kept the Passover just at the beginning of Spring. The Passover always comes at the time of the first Sabbath, after the first full moon, after the vernal equinox. Being a lunar-solar Calendar, the Jewish calendar is different from the calendar under which we live, but because it is tied to the seasons of the year and the phases of the moon, it is possible for us to identify with a high degree of accuracy the time of the Passover.

We are not primarily concerned with Jewish chronology nor with the Jewish Passover itself. Rather we are concerned with the fact that our Lord was crucified during Passover week. While it is not possible for us to know with any certainty the date of his birth, it is possible for us to know with a rather high degree of certainty the time of his death. A careful study of the Julian Calendar and the Gregorian Calendar leads us to believe that Christ died in the year A.D. 30. Putting all of these facts together, it is possible with reasonable certainty to know that this Sunday morning is the 1933rd anniversary of the resurrection of our Lord. Times and dates and anniversaries are of interest and for that reason we mention these facts, but our primary and central concern is the fact that Jesus rose from the dead. We mention it today because millions of the earth's population are today thinking particularly of Christ's resurrection. We who give special emphasis to his resurrection each Lord's day, through the commemoration of his death, burial and resurrection, in the eating of the Lord's supper, may well use this anniversary Sunday to declare again our faith in the risen Lord.

The Supreme Miracle

The word resurrection in itself means a rising from the dead, a coming forth from the dead, a return from the dead, and assumes that death has been experienced. We believe that Christ was literally crucified on the cross and that three days later he literally lived again. This is the supreme miracle. While Christ worked many miracles and all of them are an evidence of his supernatural, divine power, no single miracle is as crucial as is his own resurrection. If Jesus of Nazareth was raised from the dead, there can be no reasonable doubt that he was the Messiah and the divine Son of God; if he was not raised from the dead, he was merely the greatest of human teachers but was not divine. This, then is the crucial nature of this supreme miracle.

The evidence upon which we base our belief that Jesus was raised from the dead begins with the fact that Christ anticipated his own death and resurrection, and that he plainly declared this to his disciples. The apostle John in writing his account of the life of Christ many years after Christ's death, told of a conversation during the public ministry of Jesus in which, "Jesus answered and said unto them, Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up. The Jews therefore said, Forty and six years was this temple in building, and wilt thou raise it up in three days? But he spake of the temple of his body. When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he spake this; and they believe the scripture and the words Jesus had said." (John 2:19-22).

Luke quotes Jesus as saying, "The Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected of the Priests and scribes, and be killed, and the third day be raised up." (Luke 9:22). Matthew quotes Jesus as saying, "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." (Matt. 12:40). In Matthew 16:21, we read, "From that time began Jesus to show unto his disciples, that he must go unto Jerusalem, and suffer many things of the elders and the chief Priests and scribes, and be killed, and the third day be raised up." Finally, in Matthew 20:17-19, we read further, "And as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples apart, and on the way he said unto them, Behold, we go up to Jerusalem; and the Son of man shall be delivered unto the chief Priests and scribes; and they shall condemn him to death, and shall deliver him unto the Gentiles, to scourge and to crucify: and the third day he shall be raised up."

The fact that our Lord, prior to the events connected with his death, could prophesy all of these details in so definite a manner, coupled with the fact that the events (carried out in most cases not by friends but by enemies) happened just as he predicted they would, begins to establish faith that Jesus was raised from the dead just as he predicted. From the remainder of the New Testament we have much additional evidence concerning the events of Christ's death and resurrection. We know where, when, why, and how Christ died. We know who got his body and under what circumstances and where it was laid. The gospels also concur in asserting that Christ's resurrection had the following details connected with it: (1) It took place on the first day of the week; (2) It was first discovered by the women; (3) The stone was rolled away when the women arrived; (4) Angels were present; (5) Jesus appeared to different individuals at different times, as well as to groups of individuals; and (6) He gave every evidence of being their Master of pre-crucifixion days, still possessing the power to perform the miraculous, having a body characterized by some sort of substantiality, and yet having a new set of supernatural characteristics.

The preaching of the apostles in the early church emphasized, more than any other known fact relating to Christ, his miraculous resurrection. From Peter on Pentecost through the writings of the apostle Paul and on through the writings of the apostle John in

Revelation, the resurrection is given a primary place. The early Christians, including the inspired apostles, believed that Christ was raised from the dead, and preached that as one of the most central facts of the gospel.

### Doubt is Replaced by Faith

Of great significance is the fact that the apostles and other disciples of the Lord were deeply despondent after his crucifixion. While they had been told of his resurrection, it was beyond their power to comprehend exactly what was meant. The human experiences of the years led them to feel that the story was ended when they saw Jesus die on the cross. Accordingly, in deep sorrow they went to their lodgings to spend a week-end of sadness and despair. They were unprepared for the resurrection. They did not expect it. Mary Magdalene and the other women went to the tomb to anoint the dead body, taking with them spices for that purpose. They did not expect a resurrection or else they would have carried no spices for the embalming of the body.

At this point I turn to the gospel of Mark and read, "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." They found an empty tomb, to their surprise, and soon after they also saw the risen Lord. Then the scripture continues, "She went and told them that had been with them, as they mourned and wept. And they, when they heard that he was alive, and had been seen of her, disbelieved."

This obviously indicates that the apostles also did not expect a resurrection. Jesus appeared to them a little later and in this connection we read, "And afterward he was manifested unto the eleven themselves as they sat at meat; and he upbraided them with their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they believed not them that had seen him after he was risen." (Mark. 16:1-2, 10-11, 14).

Obviously even the apostles did not expect a resurrection. This evidence is of great importance, for something happened to change their sorrow and their despair into triumphant faith in the risen Christ. From this time forward they were willing to declare publicly and privately, at great cost to themselves, that Christ had truly been raised from the dead. They spent their lives in the proclamation of this fact. Ultimately they gave their lives as martyrs in support of this faith.

The course of events of church history was such that only the events of the resurrection adequately explain it. The spread of the early church, the personal lives of the apostles and others, Paul's conversion, and many other known facts can only be explained by solid belief in the fact that Jesus was raised from the dead.

H. D. A. Major, principle of Rippon Hall, Oxford, editor of *The Modern Church-Man*, puts it this way, "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. The 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 St. Paul declares in Romans 1:4, which proclaimed him to be the Son of God with Power."

### The Empty Tomb

One of the Primary testimonies to the fact of Christ's resurrection is the empty tomb. The evidence pertaining to the fact that the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, in which the body of Jesus was placed on Friday, was empty of that body on Sunday morning, is abundant in the gospels. The women who had carefully watched from a distance the burial of Jesus, three days later found, to their utter astonishment that the stone was rolled away and that the body was gone. They rushed back to Jerusalem, and informed the unbelieving apostles. The guards also came into the city and informed the Sanhedrin, which body then concocted the story which they commanded soldiers thereafter to repeat to explain how the tomb became empty, namely, that the body was stolen by the disciples.

Skeptics and critics have made attempts to explain the empty tomb. They have said that the body was stolen by the disciples. How could sleeping soldiers know? If they had really neglected their duty by sleeping, what would have been their fate? Why would the disciples have wanted to steal the body? If they had stolen it, how can we explain their future lives? Critics have also said that the body was removed by Joseph of Arimathea. This claim dates back only to Dr. Joseph Klausner, who wrote in Germany in the last century. There is no evidence for this claim. Why was this not known for 1800 years after the event? What reason could Joseph have had for removing the body? How could he have done so with a guard of soldiers before the tomb? How could he have completely fooled the other disciples?

Still others have said that the women went to the wrong tomb. How could this be possible? Did the apostles also go to the wrong tomb when they went back to check the women's story? Did the angels also make a mistake? A similarly ridiculous story also has said that Christ did not die but only swooned. Could the people at the cross be so completely fooled? Do Roman soldiers do their job so carelessly? If Jesus did not die at this time, when did he die, and under what circumstances?

Canon Liddon once said, preaching at St. Paul's in London, "It is the central sanctuary of our Christian faith. No other spot on earth says so much to Christian faith as does the tomb of our Lord. Observe, it is the 'place where the Lord lay.' He lies there no longer. He was not lying there when the angel addressed Mary Magdalene. With most tombs the interest consists in the fact that all that is mortal

of the saint or the hero or the relative rests beneath the stone or the sod on which we gaze.” But, in the case of Christ’s tomb, the significance lies in the fact that it was empty.

### The Resurrection Appearances

The change in the lives of the disciples from frustration and despair into confidence and faith was a result primarily of their having seen Christ alive after they had seen him die. He appeared to Mary Magdalene at the sepulchre (John 20:11-18; Mark 16:9-11). He appeared to certain women as they returned from the sepulchre. (Matt. 28:1-10). He appeared to the apostle Peter, before the evening of the day of resurrection. (Luke 24:34; 1 Cor. 15:5). He appeared to two disciples, Cleopas and another, on the way to Emmaus. (Mark 16:12-13; Luke 24:13-35). He appeared to the ten apostles, Thomas being absent, in an upper room in Jerusalem on resurrection day. (Mark 16:14-18; 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). He appeared to seven of the disciples at the Sea of Galilee, while they were fishing. (John 21:1-23). He appeared to the apostles and above 500 brethren at one time, on a mountain in Galilee. (Matt. 28:16-20; 1 Cor. 15:6). He appeared to James alone. (1 Cor. 15:7). Finally, he appeared to the apostles at Jerusalem, immediately before the ascension on the Mount of Olives. (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.

### Summary

If there ever was a man in the first century who knew all the arguments against the resurrection of Christ which the Sanhedrin could ever draw up, that man was the apostle Paul, and yet, in spite of all this, he believed Christ had been raised from the dead by the power of God, and believing this he preached it everywhere until death took him from the earth.

Dr. Howard A. Kelly, professor of gynecology at Johns Hopkins University, in his book, *A Scientific Man and the Bible*, says on page 20, “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.”

To this we would add the testimony of Wilbur Smith, in his book, *Therefore Stand*, p. 437, “To reject the resurrection is to go against every law of logic which man has discovered; to reject the resurrection is to put out the one great light that can illuminate our future; to reject the resurrection is to involve ourselves, for the rest of life, in all kinds of efforts to explain the principles and teaching and work and influence of Jesus Christ; to deny the resurrection of Christ is to forfeit any right to preach in a Christian Pulpit, talk to others about the blessings of Christ, or following Jesus, or to kneel down at the bedside of a dying man or woman and expect to bring them comfort.”

Let us believe firmly in the resurrection of Christ. Let us look forward to the time when we will be raised and will hear him say, “Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.”