

# “The Essentials”

In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things love.

## Essential #9

### The Resurrection of Jesus

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1 Corinthians 15:1-19, 35-38, 42-43

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas (Peter), then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.

Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain.

We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about 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, not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If only in this life we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

But someone will ask, “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?” You foolish person! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And what you sow is not the body that is to be, but a bare kernel, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body.

So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body.

I had a disturbing thought this week. Suppose Jesus was like Elvis, and the Resurrection was the kind of weird event that you see headlined in the *National Enquirer*. The headlines would read, **Jewish Messiah Rises from the Dead—Are space aliens to blame for the tomb being empty?** Sightings of Elvis are the kind of thing that people make jokes about, the kind of thing that you have to be really gullible to believe. I hate to think that non-Christians think that Jesus coming back to life was like that, and that the faith that Christians profess is mere gullibility.

There are many contemporary scholars who are disturbed by the difficulties in believing that Jesus of Nazareth actually came back from the dead. These scholars hold that Jesus body didn't *actually* rise from the dead, but that Jesus's personality was so influential that he *spiritually* rose from the dead.

They would have us think of the Resurrection like this: My two older sons and I like to listen to John Denver's music. It is not only beautiful, it is meaningful, and has a deeply spiritual quality to it. We have watched the PBS special on John Denver together and have been very impressed by the life of the man, his commitment to the environment, and the way in which he died by flying his plane off into the sunset until it crashed. Suppose that we are listening to “Rocky Mountain High” together, and as we hear John Denver sing “You can talk to God and listen to the casual reply . . .” we get a profound sense that he is there in the room with us, that his personality and his message will always be present and will never die. Contemporary scholars say that the disciples had an experience like that concerning Jesus, and that they then developed (made up) the stories about the Resurrection to describe their sense of Jesus's abiding presence with them.

If these scholars are right, the Resurrection of Jesus was very much like other “coming back to life”, or “near death” or “from beyond the grave” stories circulating in modern times as well as antiquity. Several mythologies in antiquity had a god or goddess who died annually (with the onset of winter) and came back to life again (with the coming of spring). One can argue that Jesus had already accomplished his important work

on the cross, bringing peace between God and humanity, and declaring “It is finished.” Is it really so important to say that his body came back to life?

In the passage we have just read, Paul seems to think it does. Evidently some teachers at Corinth, feeling embarrassment (in an almost modern way) at the idea that the Christian faith is “pie in the sky by and by,” were teaching that Christians did not come back to life again and that the faith was to help us all live better in this world. Paul says that if they teach that believers are not raised from the dead, they are implying that Jesus did not rise from the dead and “*If it is only for this life that we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.*” Paul argues for the Resurrection of Jesus not from logic but from the experience of himself and others, and then implies that this experience gives specific shape to the hope of humanity for life beyond death.

The way the Bible unfolds the Resurrection of Jesus is very curious, because each of the four gospels tells a different story. Three of the gospels have followed the same story line through the public ministry of Jesus—only John’s gospel shows Jesus from a significantly different perspective. When it comes to the crucifixion, all four gospels are very close in their description of events. After the Resurrection, however, it seems to be every writer to himself, with every account unfolding very differently. In the original ending of Mark’s gospel (which was so strange that an amplified ending had to be added very early on), the women come to the tomb, find the stone rolled back, encounter a young man inside who tells them that Jesus is risen, and then they run away and tell no one because they are so frightened. This is hardly a story written to convince people of the Resurrection. On the other hand, if the Church had decided together to come up with an empty tomb story, you would think that they would get their story straight, and such details as how many angels, which women, how many appearances and to whom would all line up. The crucifixion is not an indisputable historical fact because the Gospel writers agree on the essential details but because it is so well attested to by non-Christian chroniclers of the time. The historical basis for the Resurrection, oddly enough, has its foundation in the obvious differences in the Gospels (though I do not believe they are mutually exclusive), which prove that there was no “party line” regarding the event.

There are some significant ways in which the Gospels agree, however. Here are the agreements among two or more of the Gospels:

The women and the disciples encounter the empty tomb before they ever meet Jesus (in Elvis encounter stories, you see Elvis first—no one finds his tomb empty first)

Jesus appears only to his own followers, not to “independent” observers (If God could have arranged for reporters from the local media, it would have helped prove the case, don’t you think?)

The first witness to the Resurrection is a woman, Mary Magdalene, who evidently had a history of mental illness (Paul, who is trying to prove the Resurrection doesn’t mention her. Mark and Luke mention that she had seven demons cast out of her, though Luke makes sure you get that detail in another part of his story, 8:2. If you were making the story of the Resurrection up, this is hardly the woman you would have Jesus appear to first).

Jesus appeared to different ones and groups of his followers on more than one occasion (This was not a whole group seeing Jesus at one sitting, in a curious cloud formation, for instance.)

His followers had difficulty recognizing him (Nobody who ever saw Elvis had trouble figuring out it was Elvis—if they had, the *National Enquirer* would not have been interested in their story)

Although Jesus’s body was not in the tomb, the body in which he appeared to the disciples was of a different kind. He did still have scars from the nails and the spear, but he could walk through doorways. He was still able to eat, drink, and be touched, but he was able to appear at will.

He was ultimately taken away from his disciples into heaven.

None of the disciples believed the first reports that Jesus had arisen.

How do we account for the presence of elements in these stories that seem to argue both for the strength and the weakness of the case for the Resurrection? I don’t believe it was God’s intention to stage the Resurrection in such a way as that there could be no doubt that Jesus rose again, but rather to offer us the hope of a new *kind* of life. Jesus rose again, not to make faith easier, but to meet our *need* for a risen Savior who still has a body (to show each one of us can still be ourselves) but of a new kind (to show that our eternal life will not simply be an indefinite extension of this one with all its difficulty and misery).

This is why Jesus chose to appear to Mary Magdalene first, not because she would be the most convincing witness, but because she was the representative of the kind of people who needed the Resurrection the most. Seen in this light, when John writes in his gospel that “these signs are written so you may believe that Jesus is the Christ”, he means not “so you may be *convinced* that Jesus is the Christ,” but “so you *by faith* may have a new kind of life in his name (John 20:31).”

Has anyone close to you ever had a deeply moving religious experience? The excitement of a person who has had such an experience makes everyone around them uncomfortable. The disciples were certainly uncomfortable when Mary reported that Jesus had appeared to her. But someone having such an experience opens the possibility of someone else having the experience also. Paul could not accept Jesus’s Resurrection, and indeed actively persecuted the church, until Jesus made himself real to Paul on the road to Damascus. Jesus became so real that Paul was later willing to face persecution, conflict, and ridicule (described in several places in the book of Acts) preaching the very Resurrection he at first thought was impossible.

There is an indisputable historical fact, universally attested to by both Christians and non-Christians regarding the Resurrection. That fact is not that Jesus rose again from the dead—even though I believe both that Jesus did indeed rise from the dead and that the Gospels offer strong evidence for his rising. The indisputable fact from history is that *Jesus’s followers were convinced that they had experienced encounters with the risen Jesus that proved his claim to be God’s only Son and Savior of the World.* Someone may doubt that the Resurrection happened, but no one can doubt that Paul and the other apostles *believed* with all their hearts that the Resurrection happened. They believed it such that they were willing to expose themselves to ridicule and death for it.

The Christian faith rests squarely on the picture its *witnesses* give of Jesus. These witnesses are of at least two kinds: those who experienced the risen Christ and told about it in the New Testament, and those in our day who have experienced the risen Christ and have lived before us in such a way as to demonstrate the new life at work in them. The odd truth is that the Bible begins by describing why people can’t be trusted because of sin, and it culminates by asking us to trust in the witness of the people who have known Jesus. But this is the way of a loving God, who will not bring us into relationship with Himself without also bringing us into relationship with others.

Jesus is alive! This is a fact that one knows not because it can be proven, it is something one knows because it can be *experienced*. That he is alive is not merely *true*, it is true in a way that makes all the *difference* to a person’s life. The metaphor of the Resurrection is a seed that is planted and is born again as a new kind of thing. For those of us who are already believers and who are hoping and praying for a friend or a loved one to become a follower of Jesus as well, there is another metaphor of the Resurrection: the butterfly. Jesus’s body was buried in the tomb as one thing and came out a very different thing, but not instantaneously. Those to whom we bear witness don’t need to be convinced that the Resurrection happened, they need to experience the Resurrection for themselves. With our witness we will produce the discomfort that will lead our unbelieving caterpillar friends into the cocoon/tomb of frustration with life as it is now from where in God’s timing they will experience the risen Jesus Christ who will offer them the butterfly quality of a new life with Him. And just as the disciples experienced the risen Christ on multiple occasions, so may we experience His reality and life repeatedly in our walk with Him.

He is risen indeed!

*Pastor David*