

EXPLORING ITS THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE
AND ONGOING RELEVANCE

THE
RESURRECTION
OF
JESUS CHRIST



W. ROSS HASTINGS

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Introduction

Christians everywhere value the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead two thousand years ago. Often they do so because they have heard that it is a historic fact and therefore a sound foundation for their faith. The first chapter of this book certainly confirms all of this to be true. The resurrection of Jesus Christ *is* one of the best-attested facts in history. Many books have been written on this theme. This book, however, is not really about that. It is not apologetics. Rather, it is theology. It answers the question, So what? What did and what does the resurrection mean? What does it mean for God? For Jesus? For humanity? For creation? For science? For the arts?

I recently traveled in a small plane piloted by my bonus-son¹ Brandon Carrillo. When I told him what this book was going to be about—that we know and value the fact that Jesus rose from the dead but that we don’t often think deeply about its meaning—he said, “You mean it’s like the buttons on the cockpit of my plane? You can’t just flick one of them on without knowing what it does, what it’s going to do to the engine or the wings. You have to know its meaning.” “Exactly!” I responded. “We Christians flick the switch of the resurrection because we know we have to believe it (Rom. 10:9) or because it makes for credible witness to our faith, but we often don’t know its meaning, all that it has done, what it continues to do now, for us and for creation.”

Chapter 1 briefly revisits the question of the historicity of the resurrection, emphasizing that it was a bodily event and looking at the distinct emphases of the Gospel writers. Chapters 2–6 as a whole focus on what the resurrection has accomplished—that is, what it means *for our salvation*. Chapter 2 begins the exposition of the meaning or theological significance of the resurrection

1. This term seems better to me than the formal “stepson.” My wife and I lost our spouses to cancer in 2008 and married three years later, and we determined we would call each other’s kids bonus-daughters and bonus-sons.

by exploring the question, What does the resurrection have to do with the atonement, our salvation, and, in particular, our regeneration and our justification? Chapter 3 asks the question, What does the resurrection of the *person* of Christ and his personal history have to do with our history, and so with our salvation? This chapter focuses on the significance of the resurrection for three great themes of the Christian tradition: Christ's participation in humanity, recapitulation, and the *Christus Victor* (Christ the Victor) model of the atonement. Chapter 4 asks the pertinent question, What does the resurrection have to do with our actual transformation as persons—that is, our progressive sanctification? This chapter includes a discussion of the relationship between justification and sanctification as *theosis*, or deification, a term that has been used for centuries to speak of our transformation to become like God in character as a result of being in union with Christ. Chapter 5 moves to the question, What does the resurrection of Jesus have to do with our vocation or mission as humans, as the church, and as individual Christians? In light of who Jesus is as resurrected in a body and as the last Adam, we will gain a sense of the integral depth and width of what mission really is, including the role that our everyday work plays. Chapter 6 moves on from consideration of what the resurrection means for us in the kingdom that has come to ask the question, What does the resurrection mean for the kingdom when it is fully come? What is the future of Christians after we die, or when Christ returns? This chapter involves discussion of the glorification of the believer, bodily resurrection, and what we can know about resurrected bodies in light of Jesus's postresurrection body.

In chapter 7, the theme of the book shifts from an emphasis on the saving efficacy of the resurrection to questions regarding *being*—sometimes called ontological (*ontos* = being) matters. The saving nature of the resurrection is grounded in who the risen Christ was and is. So what does the resurrection have to say about the person of Christ, his identity? In other words, what does the doctrine of the resurrection contribute to Christology, the doctrine of the person of Christ? Chapter 8 explores what the resurrection means for his office as our Great High Priest, who is also King-Priest-Prophet, leading to a discussion of the importance of the resurrection for the worship of the church, including its preaching, seen as a participation in Christ's preaching. Chapter 9 poses the crucial question, What does Jesus's resurrection in a body mean for creation? Does it perhaps reaffirm God's commitment to his creation? If this is so, what does this mean for ethics, and what does it mean for the study of science and the arts? The final chapter explores the nature of the second coming of Christ in light of the resurrection. Here we look at the literal, personal nature of that coming and what the new creation might bring.

The Resurrection as Good History

This [the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead] is a historical happening not of the kind that fades away from us and crumbles into the dust, but of the kind that remains real and therefore that resists corruption and moves the other way, forward throughout all history to the end-time and to the consummation of all things in the new creation. Jesus remains live and a real historical happening, more real and more historical than any other historical event, for this is the only historical event that does not suffer from decay and is not threatened by annihilation and illusion.

—T. F. Torrance¹

This book is about the theological significance and ongoing relevance of the resurrection of Jesus Christ in the twenty-first century, including and maybe especially in its times of crisis. It seeks to offer a message of defiant hope for the Christian, for the church, for all humanity, and for all creation. The words of Scottish theologian T. F. Torrance above set the tone for the message of this entire book, first because they establish the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus, and second because they express what is at stake in the historical reality that the real person of the Son of God, who became fully and truly human for us and for creation, really died and really rose again from the dead. We can enter into the consequences of that resurrection through faith in Jesus, which brings us into union with Jesus by the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

1. T. F. Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection*, 95.

But this “experience” is not ungrounded subjectivity. Rather, it is grounded in the historical reality that Jesus of Nazareth rose again from the dead, is alive today, and enters into living relationship with every believing person by the power of the Holy Spirit.

This book is primarily about the theological meaning and consequences of the resurrection. All subsequent chapters major on that theme: the theological meaning of the resurrection for our salvation and our being as human persons. This book is about the significance of the resurrection for the atonement, for our justification and sanctification and vocation, for the high priesthood of Jesus, for creation, for science and the arts, and for the future resurrection of humanity and the renewal of creation. It is not intended, therefore, to be a book about the apologetics for the veracity of the resurrection. It assumes the veracity of the bodily resurrection of Jesus. Nevertheless, just to establish confidence in its meaning and consequences, we begin with a brief summary of the evidence that Jesus really did rise from the dead.

Examining the evidence is important simply because the New Testament apostles gladly staked their claim about the truth of the Christian gospel on this historical reality. The fact that the Christian faith is a historical faith, dependent on a historical reality, already provides evidence of the importance of the incarnation and the resurrection of Jesus. Paul, for example, made no bones about the fact that if you could disprove the resurrection, you could toss Christianity aside as a fable not worth following and simply live it up in a hedonistic way: “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die” (1 Cor. 15:32). He based his entire exposition of the gospel and his entire life on the fact that Jesus had risen. He staked his claim about the uniqueness of Jesus Christ precisely on this one historical point because he was convinced that it was true. Paul had, after all, actually encountered the risen Christ and had his view of God and the world upended. The most significant evidence that the resurrection happened is the transformation of the disciples of Jesus, their lifelong commitment to it, and their martyrdom for it. The accusation that they stole the body of Jesus and hid it somewhere is not logically tenable. Nobody allows themselves to be martyred for something they know to be a lie. The swoon theory—that is, the idea that Jesus merely swooned on the cross and then recovered—not only is untenable but also would not and could not have generated the zeal and faithfulness of apostolic witness.

When we fast-forward to the twentieth century, one of the most convincing accounts of the evidence for the real, bodily resurrection of Jesus was that given by the great professor of English literature at both Oxford and Cambridge, C. S. Lewis, who is known best by some for *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Lewis was baptized in the Church of Ireland but drifted away from the

faith. His conversion at the age of thirty-two was due in part to the influence of J. R. R. Tolkien, but a significant cornerstone of his faith came from his investigation into the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. And Lewis, like the apostle Paul, knew what was at stake with this claim. One cannot be neutral about Jesus's claim that he was the Son of God and his promise that he would rise again.

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about [Jesus]: I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.²

Lewis went on to say that to “preach Christianity meant primarily to preach the Resurrection.”³ In a letter written in May 1944, Lewis expressed his belief in the veracity and the importance of the resurrection:

It is very necessary to get the story clear. I heard a man say, “The importance of the Resurrection is that it gives evidence of survival, evidence that the human personality survives death.” On that view what happened to Christ would be what had always happened to all men, the difference being that in Christ's case we were privileged to see it happening. This is certainly not what the earliest Christian writers thought. Something perfectly new in the history of the universe had happened. Christ had defeated death. The door, which had always been locked, had for the very first time been forced open.⁴

What Can Be Proved?

Any investigation of the resurrection of Jesus must include consideration of the historical sources and documentation; and once the reliability of the documents has been established, consideration must be given to what they

2. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 53.

3. Lewis, *Miracles*, 234.

4. Lewis, *God in the Dock*, 170.

record—the empty tomb, eyewitness accounts of Jesus’s postresurrection appearances, and the ongoing witness of the church. How dubious all proposed alternative explanations to what happened (the swoon theory, for example) have been must also be considered. But before we discuss some of these lines of evidence, I want to preface this discussion of apologetics by indicating what it is we can and cannot “prove” about the resurrection. “Proof” is probably the wrong word. We can discover much *evidence* for the resurrection. We can show that the historical events are best made sense of by the proposal of resurrection. But we cannot offer proof. Proof requires reproducibility. We cannot reproduce the resurrection of Jesus in a laboratory. This is a discussion within the realm of history, not the natural sciences. We can show that the resurrection is a historical fact on the basis of *critical realism* as it applies to history, but not on the basis of *logical positivism*. And actually, even science itself functions on the same basis: critical realism rather than logical positivism. Let me explain.

Trying to convince someone of the veracity of the resurrection by seeking to show absolute proof actually reveals an uncritical enculturation to modernity, in which reason and faith are considered to be separate. Seeking proof—as opposed to evidence—is in keeping with a philosophy regarding scientific discovery that arose out of modernity, one known as logical positivism or verificationism. This was an influential school of thought in the philosophy of science that emerged from the Berlin Circle and the Vienna Circle in the late 1920s and 1930s. It asserted that only statements that are verifiable through direct empirical observation or logical proof are actually meaningful. Only scientific knowledge is real knowledge, it was thought. One can easily see how this would make for a rift between theology and science and create the way for scientism of the kind that Richard Dawkins has exhibited in recent times, for example. The resurrection of Jesus accounts well for all the historical evidence, and there is a considerable amount of that historical evidence. But on the basis of the criteria of verificationism, since we cannot reproduce this event, “proof” of the resurrection of Jesus does not exist, and theological knowledge based on it does not exist either.

Enter the philosopher of science Karl Popper (1902–94), who attacked this premise for knowledge and offered falsificationism as a better way of establishing scientific knowledge than verificationism. He exposed true empirical verification as logically impossible. The more realistic aim of science, he suggested, is corroboration of a scientific theory such that there can be reasonable confidence that it accounts for the data and that what is being proposed actually bears a resemblance to reality as it is. Its goal is a rational realism or a scientific realism that recognizes that we have to, at best, settle for strong

“truthlikeness” or “corroborated verisimilitude.”⁵ For example, proposing a theory about what electrons are and where they are situated must involve hypotheses and a model that can be tested. Or stated positively, when all the data has come in, these hypotheses must account well for all the evidence and be self-consistent. But at the end of the day, we cannot assume that the proposed model represents exactly what electrons look like. There remains an element of mystery. No one has actually seen an electron or a gluon. This falsification epistemology makes room for knowledge that is not strictly scientific, such as historical knowledge. On Popper’s account, therefore, the resurrection of Jesus can be considered “scientific” in that it accounts well for all the evidence and because there has been no evidence to render it false.

The evidence for the resurrection does not stand or fall on rationalistic apologetics, therefore. I wish to stress that theology, including resurrection theology, is done by “faith seeking understanding,” or critical realism, and not by logical positivism. Theology functions properly in an epistemological sense when it encounters mystery, responds in faith, and then pursues understanding. The order is mystery, faith, understanding, and not the other way around. Separating reason from faith and disallowing all mystery is the epistemology of modernity. Christian apologetics, if we are not careful, can sometimes be *of* modernity, and I want to avoid this while still engaging the historical evidence well and fruitfully. I believe that the road to convincing people of the resurrection of Jesus is actually explaining what the significance of the resurrection is, theologically speaking. When they grasp this and gain a sense of wonder about it, which is the core purpose of this book, they will rise in faith to accept the history and, even more, to believe in the Lord of history.

Another way to come at this is to say that, yes, reasonable (as opposed to rationalistic) apologetics has a work it can do here, but the awakening and revealing work of the Spirit is still required for people to believe. Logic and evidence and so-called general revelation are not enough for people to be convinced. Saving revelation is provided by the revealing God, and in the very act of revelation by God, communion with him is established. Stating this the other way around, it is only as relationship is begun that revelation can be imparted. Revelation understood in a theological way is not just a knowledge category; it is a *communion* category. God is the triune revealer as the Revealer, the Revealed, and the Revelation—that is, as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Father reveals himself in the person of the Son objectively, and we receive that revelation subjectively through the person of the Holy Spirit. We can consider this in the opposite direction. The Holy Spirit

5. Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations*, 253–92.

awakens those who are seeking truth even as they seek, and he opens their eyes to truth as it is proclaimed. But they are already in relationship with the Spirit by the time their eyes are opened. The *substance* of what the Spirit reveals is the person of the Son, and in the very act of receiving revelation, people are already receiving the Son—they come into union with him as persons in Christ. And as such, they are now in relationship to the Father as children of God. There is, in other words, a trinitarian hermeneutical circle into which seekers must enter to find the truth about the resurrection and life in God. This is why evidence for the resurrection has its place within a critically realistic, “faith seeking understanding” framework. It makes sense of what happened. It is, as we have said, a critically realistic approach that leaves room for God.

What Is the Evidence?

With these provisos, we can now examine the historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus and find that the facts as they are known are best made sense of by this great central claim of the Christian faith that makes Jesus unique among all religious leaders, the Son of God and the Lord of the cosmos.

Reliable Reporting?

It is not surprising that each of the four Gospels describes in vivid detail, though from a different perspective, the unexpected reality that Jesus rose from the dead. The event was unexpected even though Jesus had informed his disciples beforehand on a number of occasions that he would rise. Either his words did not register in their minds, and/or they still did not fully believe who he was. One may argue that it is not surprising that these Gospel writers mention and make much of the resurrection, and one may also argue that they were “of the church” and therefore biased and unreliable. Bible authors arguing for the Bible may seem like circular reasoning. This is, of course, unfair to these writers—one of whom, Luke, is an irenic and careful physician and historian, for example. What is more, these four writers agree on the major events that occurred during and around the resurrection.

Furthermore, it is highly improbable that early Christians would have invented the crucifixion event and therefore its sequel, the resurrection. The cross was a “stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles” (1 Cor. 1:23), so why invent something like that? Jewish people knew that to hang on a tree meant to be under a curse (Deut. 21:23; Gal. 3:13), so this was no

way to glorify their Messiah.⁶ In an unemotional and historically conscious way, these Gospel writers describe the eyewitness accounts of the disciples and many others and so give a dispassionate and convincing account of the historical reality that Jesus was risen.⁷

In response to doubters who say that the Gospel records were written too many years after the fact to be reliable, New Testament critical scholar Craig Blomberg has insisted that a strong case may be made “that all three [Synoptic] Gospels were composed within about thirty years of Christ’s death . . . and well within the period of time when people could check up on the accuracy of the facts they contain.”⁸ Other historical documents that are considered reliable do not have anything like the turnaround time that the Gospels do. The Gospel writers also frequently make statements that ground their writings in history, such as which Caesar was ruling in Rome, suggesting that they knew they were writing history and not wishful narratives.

The fact that there may be some inconsistencies regarding details in the four accounts (number of women at the tomb, number of angels, location of appearances) on the one hand suggests that the authors naturally had slightly different purposes for how they used the accounts of events in their narratives. On the other hand, it confirms how recent the events were when described by the writers. As New Testament scholar N. T. Wright has suggested, “surface inconsistencies,” which may make the accounts appear to be “careless fiction,” rather constitute “a strong point in favor of their early character.” He goes on to say that these “stories exhibit exactly the surface tension which we associate, not with tales artfully told by people eager to sustain a fiction and therefore anxious to make everything look right, but with hurried, puzzled accounts of those who have seen with their own eyes something which took them horribly by surprise.”⁹ Critiques of the historicity of the resurrection offered by liberal “historical Jesus” scholars abound, guided by a presupposition against the miraculous. Most of these objections, including the notion that the resurrection does not belong in the actual narrative of the life of Jesus but was added later by the church, arise from an unfortunate severing of history from theology.

But for the sake of the skeptic, the question may be asked, What *external* evidence is there for the resurrection? Do Jewish or Roman historians of the time who were not Christians speak of Jesus and his cross and resurrection? Michael J. Wilkins and J. P. Moreland state that “when mutually accepted

6. This is a point made in Habermas and Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*, 282.

7. See Fuller, *The Formation of the Resurrection Narratives*, 37.

8. Blomberg, “Where Do We Start Studying Jesus?,” 28.

9. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 612.

standards of historiography (the science of historical investigation) are applied to ancient religious records, the Jesus of history fares well historically.” They suggest further that when “records of religious history are compared—such as Zoroaster, Buddha, and Mohammed—we have better historical documentation for Jesus than the founder of any other religion.”¹⁰ Edwin Yamauchi, in particular, has provided evidence in the form of ten writers who make references to Jesus outside of the New Testament.¹¹ These include the Roman historian Tacitus (*Annals* 15.44) and the Jewish historian Josephus (*Jewish Antiquities* 18.63–64),¹² who respectively refer to early Christian belief in the death by crucifixion and the resurrection of Jesus specifically.

Having given a nod to the historical reliability of the New Testament records and having noted references to the resurrection in some nonbiblical sources, we may now examine the evidence in the substance of these records. The following realities are *best accounted for* by the hypothesis that Jesus rose from the dead on the third day after his death, and they form a self-consistent and reasonable account¹³ with better explanatory power than any other options: the crucifixion that preceded the resurrection; the empty tomb and the postresurrection appearances of Jesus; the transformation of the eyewitnesses; the Pauline witness to the appearances; and the centrality of the resurrection in the teaching of the early church. As strong as this evidence may be, we must confidently *proclaim* rather than *defend* the resurrection, trusting the revealing God to work in the power of the resurrection to convince and convert people.

The Crucifixion That Preceded the Resurrection

The events of Jesus’s death by crucifixion and his resurrection are inseparable. The crucifixion of Jesus is therefore part of the core historical data surrounding the resurrection, as Gary Habermas has suggested.¹⁴ That Jesus was executed by crucifixion is recorded not only in all four of the Gospels but also in a significant number of non-Christian sources of that period, includ-

10. Wilkins and Moreland, *Jesus under Fire*, 3.

11. Yamauchi, “Jesus outside the New Testament,” 207–30.

12. One must not press this too far, however. Josephus scholar Paul Spilsbury states, “As to being a witness to the resurrection of Jesus, I would say the evidence is equivocal. The famous *Testimonium Flavianum* has undoubtedly been corrupted by Christian scribal tradition. At best we could say that Josephus was aware that early Christians believed that Jesus had been raised.” Personal email communication, October 6, 2020.

13. For fuller treatments of the evidence for the resurrection, see Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*; Craig, *Assessing the New Testament Evidence for the Historicity of the Resurrection*; Habermas, *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope*; and Habermas and Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*.

14. Habermas and Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*, 48–49.

ing the writings of Josephus, Tacitus, and Lucian of Samosata, as well as the Talmud.¹⁵ Even John Dominic Crossan, a highly critical liberal scholar, acknowledges, “That he was crucified is as sure as anything historical can ever be.”¹⁶ As noted above, the disciples concocting a story about Jesus dying a death by crucifixion would have made no sense.

In addition to providing corroborating evidence for the historicity of the resurrection, the crucifixion also sets the tone for overcoming the objection that perhaps Jesus did not actually die on the cross and so was resuscitated rather than resurrected. According to the now-famous sentiments of the nineteenth-century German liberal New Testament scholar David Strauss,¹⁷ it is unthinkable, given the brutal nature of scourging and crucifixion, that Jesus could survive them without medical help, roll back a heavy stone, beat off the armed guards, walk some distance on pierced feet, and convince his disciples in this pathetic state that he was the Lord of life. What’s more, the Gospel writers provide a number of details that indicate Jesus was really dead: the wound in his side, the emission of blood and water, the witness of an experienced centurion. Further, the Jewish leaders and Pilate used overt strategies to anticipate and prevent a possible claim of resurrection by the disciples. The assertion that Jesus had not really died was not one of them. It simply wasn’t a reasonable possibility. And certainly the swoon theory would not have led to the prevailing teaching of the early church that Jesus rose victorious from the dead. It seems clear that Jesus must really have been dead, since Christianity is not likely to have been birthed from the “apparent-death” hypothesis.

The Empty Tomb and the Postresurrection Appearances of Jesus

It is important to understand the expectations and worldview of the disciples who witnessed and then proclaimed the resurrection of Jesus. New Testament scholars such as N. T. Wright have made us aware that their context was Second Temple Judaism, which “supplied the concept of resurrection” but most certainly did not spontaneously generate it. Something happened that was *permitted* within their Judaistic worldview—that is, resurrection. But

15. These and other references may be found in Habermas and Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*, 49. One example will suffice. Cornelius Tacitus, in discussing Nero and his crucifixion of Christians, writes, “Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus” (*Annals* 15.44, ca. AD 115).

16. Crossan, *Jesus*, 145, cited in Habermas and Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*, 49, 257.

17. Strauss, *A New Life of Jesus*, 1:412.

the actual teaching on resurrection that followed Jesus's resurrection—that is, the “striking and consistent Christian mutations” regarding resurrection—surpassed the teaching of Judaism. When asked where this teaching came from, the early Christians would have responded by relaying two sets of stories, says Wright. The stories that spawned the awareness that Jesus was the Son of God, and that God was working in a radically new way, were those of an empty tomb and of the postresurrection appearances Jesus made to his disciples. And they must go together, for an empty tomb on its own could represent tragedy and loss, and appearances on their own could have been construed as visions. But considered together, they were “a powerful reason for the emergence of the belief” in the resurrection.¹⁸ And indeed, they did go together. The disappearance of a body and then the discovery of that person fully alive account for the only reasonable explanation for the disciples' shift from their Judaistic view of resurrection.

All the postresurrection appearances Jesus made, taken together, also constitute strong evidence for his resurrection. This is true with respect to the number of the appearances that are recorded and how detailed they are, the numbers of people in addition to the apostles who saw him—five hundred people don't see the same hallucination all at once (1 Cor. 15:6)—and the sheer physicality of these encounters: the apostles saw his hands and his side, Thomas touched his wounds (John 20:27), and the risen Jesus even ate fish, according to the account of Luke the doctor (Luke 24:39–43). This was no ghost. The resurrection's “explanatory power”¹⁹ outguns alternative explanations for what might have happened.

Christ did not rise in the minds of the disciples but in real time and space, and this immediately establishes Christianity as a religion based on history that can be assessed by critical historical scholarship. And, according to the best historians, Jesus's resurrection stands as a well-attested fact of history. It is important to note that this central tenet of Christianity is grounded in story and in history. George Eldon Ladd, in his *A Theology of the New Testament*, states, “God did not make himself known through a system of teaching nor a theology nor a book, but through a series of events recorded in the Bible. The coming of Jesus of Nazareth was the climax of this series of redemptive events; and his resurrection is the event that validates all that came before.”²⁰ The resurrection is for Christianity the ultimate apologetic that is the validation of all the miracles of the Bible. And it is the climax of all

18. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 686.

19. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 687.

20. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 354.

of God's redemptive acts. If the resurrection did not occur, as Ladd goes on to say, "the long course of God's redemptive acts to save his people ends in a dead-end street, in a tomb. . . . Christian faith is then incarcerated in the tomb along with the final and highest self-revelation of God in Christ—if Christ is indeed dead."²¹ But the empty tomb and the postresurrection appearances of Jesus together comprise in part the explanatory power of the proposal that Jesus Christ rose from the dead in glorious triumph.

The Transformation of the Eyewitnesses

The disciples of Jesus certainly claimed to have seen and encountered Jesus. If there is a ring of authenticity regarding the witness of the apostles to the resurrection, it is corroborated by the transformation they underwent as a result of their encounters with the resurrected Christ. In general, the disciples were transformed from fearful to bold, from aimless to missionally focused, and these changes were permanent, for they remained faithful to the end of their lives, through persecution, hardship, and martyrdom. Peter is just one example. After denying his Lord three times, he became the greatest of the Jewish apostolic preachers, and tradition tells us that he was martyred in Rome by being crucified upside down. The intestinal fortitude, the intellectual awakening, the steady, faithful leadership of this man following his post-resurrection encounters with Jesus are in stark contrast with his weak-kneed denials, his lacunae concerning the cruciform nature of the Messiah, and his boastful claims to leadership. The Jewish authorities did not know how to deal with the persuasive and intelligent preaching of Peter even within days of his receiving the Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 4:13).

The transformation of the hardheaded, persecuting, Christ-blaspheming Pharisee Saul into the brilliant, persecuted, Christ-proclaiming apostle Paul is best explained by an unusual encounter, one that is in fact described three times in the book of Acts. The defender supreme of the Jewish religion became the apostle to the Gentiles! This evidence is best explained by an encounter with the living, resurrected Christ.

And then there is the conversion of James the brother of Jesus, who was skeptical about his brother's identity—until he saw the risen Lord. It is interesting that the Gospel writers do not hide the fact that Jesus's brothers did not initially believe in him—interesting because it is a potentially embarrassing fact. One of the hallmarks that authenticates these writers is that they do not mask these realities. Mark (3:21; 6:2–6) and John (7:5) both record

21. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 354.

this filial unbelief. First Corinthians 15:7 is Paul's record that James had an encounter with the risen Jesus. The extent of James's transformation is measured by the fact that he became a "pillar" of the early church (Gal. 2:9) and was martyred for his faith. The scholar Reginald H. Fuller suggests that the evidence surrounding James's conversion was so convincing that "it might be said that if there were no record of an appearance to James the Lord's brother in the New Testament we should have to invent one in order to account for his post-resurrection conversion and rapid advance."²²

The Pauline Witness to the Appearances

According to Gary Habermas and Michael Licona, evidence for the claims of the disciples that Jesus appeared to them lies in "early and independent sources" of three kinds: the testimony of Paul about the disciples, the oral tradition passed on through the early church, and the written works of the early church.²³ Our focus here is on the appearances as validated by Paul. The next section addresses the teaching of the early church.

Paul claimed his own authority as an apostle on the same grounds as those of the other apostles: he had seen the risen Christ. Paul's conversion is itself a strong apologetic for the resurrection, but his attestation of the witness of the other apostles has weight in light of his recognition by the church as an apostle. Paul's authority as an apostle was acknowledged by the apostolic fathers (including Polycarp, Eusebius, and Ignatius), including two who were disciples of the apostles (Polycarp was a disciple of John and cited Paul sixteen times; Papias, also taught by John, cited Paul twice).²⁴ The book of Acts records that Paul met Peter and the other apostles and fellowshiped with them (Acts 15). And in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul asserts the veracity of his own witness to the resurrection but also corroborates that of the other disciples, including Peter, the Twelve, James the brother of Jesus, "all the apostles," and the "five hundred" (vv. 3–8, 11).

The Centrality of the Resurrection in the Teaching of the Early Church

With regard to the preaching of the resurrection, there is evidence from critical New Testament scholarship that it began very quickly after the resurrection event. For example, James D. G. Dunn, in his book *Remembering*

22. Fuller, *The Formation of the Resurrection Narratives*, 37.

23. Habermas and Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*, 51.

24. Habermas and Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*, 258n18.

Jesus, asserts that the words of 1 Corinthians 15:3–4 (“For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures”) are an early Christian creed that was formalized and preached within months of Jesus’s death.²⁵ Paul, it is agreed, *received* this tradition three years after his conversion (Gal. 1:18–19) during a visit to Jerusalem, where he met with Peter and James. If, as seems reasonable, the appearance of Jesus to Paul happened about two years after Jesus’s resurrection, and the tradition preceded this event, then the tradition was extant within five years of Jesus’s resurrection, which is very early by the standards of ancient literature.²⁶

Accounts of how the appearances claimed by the apostles were communicated in both the oral tradition and the written works of the early church have been documented carefully and extensively by various scholars.²⁷ Notably, church fathers Irenaeus and Tertullian both bear witness to the passing on of the resurrection tradition from the apostle Peter to Clement of Rome (AD 35–99), who fellowshipped with and then succeeded Peter in his position as bishop of Rome. The oral tradition was then written down by Clement, who references the resurrection in a letter to Corinth: “Having therefore received a charge, and having been fully assured through the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ and confirmed in the word of God with full assurance of the Holy Ghost, they went forth with the glad tidings that the kingdom of God should come.”²⁸ Irenaeus also provides evidence of the fellowship of Polycarp (AD 69–155) with the apostles and the transmission of the faith to him from them. From Clement, Ignatius, and Polycarp, on to the apologists like Justin Martyr, Athenagoras, and Theophilus, and on to the great early theologians like Tertullian, Irenaeus, Hippolytus, and Origen,²⁹ the resurrection was asserted and assumed as an accepted fact of history, as the pillar of orthodox Christian faith, and as that which distinguished it from dualistic Gnostic thought systems. “Something perfectly new in the history of the universe had happened.” Truly, “Christ had defeated death. The door, which had always been locked, had for the very first time been forced open.”³⁰

25. Dunn, *Remembering Jesus*, 855.

26. For more on this, see Habermas and Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*, 160–61.

27. For example, Habermas and Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*, 53–63; and Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 480–532, 587–99.

28. *1 Clement* 42.3, <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/1clement-lightfoot.html>, accessed October 7, 2020.

29. See Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 484–528, and references therein.

30. Lewis, *God in the Dock*, 170.

The care taken in the providence of God over the event of the resurrection of his Son signals its importance. The remainder of this book is an exposition of the resurrection's *meaning*, which may hopefully explain why it was revealed in the careful way it was.

Discussion Questions

1. Do we have proof of the resurrection based on logical positivism? Or do we have strong evidence that the historical facts are best made sense of by what the early church proclaimed: that Jesus rose from the dead (critical realism)?
2. Summarize the evidence with six brief bullet points.
3. Engage in the spiritual practice of resurrection by reading one of the accounts of the resurrection in the Gospels and celebrating its reality with a prayer or song that expresses worship to the risen Son and your response to this great historical reality.