

Title: Resurrection Faith
Text: 1 Corinthians 15:3-8
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(This message draws extensively on research in 'Doctrine – What Christians should believe' by Mark Driscoll and Gerry Breshears - Crossway, 2010)

We have turned the corner. We are in week four of our six week journey exploring the Apostles' Creed. Before we continue that exploration I want us to step back for a moment and ask address some really important questions.

Why do have the Apostle's Creed? Isn't the Bible enough?
What were the events that led the formation of the Creed?
What questions or challenges was it seeing to address?

The earliest forms of the Apostles' Creed go back to the mid-second century – around AD150. The earliest forms of the Creed were a series of questions put to people before they were baptized. So, a baptismal candidate would be asked:

Do you believe in God the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth?

And they would respond, 'I believe', and so on.

Second, the Creed was also used as a summary of the faith taught to new Christians in an era when most people could neither read nor write. With Creeds they could memorize that substance of the Christian faith.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the Creed was used to define and defend the Christian faith against heresy, or error. Heresy is belief or opinion that is contrary to the orthodox and widely agreed to belief.

One of the philosophies that the early church struggled against was Gnosticism. So-called Gnostic Christians believed that Jesus wasn't really a human being, but a spirit that had the appearance of being human. So when Jesus was crucified on the Cross it wasn't really a human being that was killed, but a spirit that looked human. In effect, the Gnostics believed that on the Cross God was play-acting; God was pretending to die.

The response of the Creed is direct and to the point. Jesus was born to a human mother, lived a human life and died a brutal and human death. What's more, his real body was laid in a tomb only to be gloriously raised in bodily form three days later. In opposition to Marcion and the Gnostics, the Creed affirms that Jesus lived a physical life, died a physical death and experienced a physical resurrection.

Which leads me the part of the Creed we will explore today:

On the third day (Jesus) rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come to judge the living and the dead.

Perhaps the most outrageous belief of early Christianity was that Jesus was raised from the dead. The common belief in the first century as now is that dead people do not rise from the grave. But the early church claimed that Jesus did rise from the grave, and that his resurrection, together with the crucifixion, are the central and defining events of the Christian faith. The resurrection of Jesus was so central, so fundamental to the Christian faith that Paul wrote to the Corinthian church and said this:

If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.
(1 Corinthians 15:14)

Let me put Paul's words into our context. If Jesus was not supernaturally and physically raised from the dead, we should all pack up and go home. I should give up being a pastor and return to being an accountant and you should all go to the beach. If Jesus was not raised we are a sadly deluded bunch of misfits wasting our time.

Now, no-one get up just yet! There is no reason for me to give up the bible and return to tax returns. I think we have many compelling and substantial reasons to trust in the historical reality of the resurrection. Before we look at them, it's important we define what the resurrection is, and is not.

Resurrection is not resuscitation. Jesus was not revived from a coma.

Resurrection is not revivification. Revivication happens when someone dies and comes back to life, only to die again. Can you imagine what it was life for Lazarus – experiencing death twice?

Resurrection is not reincarnation. Reincarnation is when the soul supposedly escapes a dying body and takes residence in another body.

Resurrection is the coming back to life of a dead body, that new resurrected body never to experience death again.

Paul helped establish the church in Corinth. A few years after he left them it seems doubt crept into some believers minds as to whether the resurrection was either real or even necessary to Christian faith. A Gnostic form of Christian belief had infected the Corinthian church that Paul is challenging head on: If Christ has not been raised then my preaching is hopeless and your faith is useless.

Earlier he says this to them:

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, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.
(1 Corinthians 15:3-8)

Clearly and succinctly Paul lays out the weight of evidence for the resurrection. The resurrection of Jesus is not a case of wishful thinking but historical and verifiable fact.

Belief in the resurrection then and now is faith based on facts – faith with verifiable and observable substance.

Let's look at the facts that I believe together build an overwhelming and compelling case for the physical resurrection of Jesus.

Jesus Died

This is what the Bible tells us of the events leading up to Jesus' death.

- He experienced a sleepless night of trials and beatings.
- He was scourged, a punishment so awful that many died as they endured it.
- He had a spear thrust into his side.
- He was crucified and a professional executioner declared him dead.
- His body was wrapped in 50 kilograms of spice and cloth in accordance with Jewish practice.
- He was buried in a tomb for three days where there was no food, water nor medical attention available – even if he was still alive.

Even today there are those that say that Jesus didn't really die on the Cross; that he fell into a deep coma from which he later recovered. Under this theory it was a recovered not a resurrected Jesus that the disciples encountered.

Vernon McGee was a Presbyterian theologian and minister. A woman once wrote to him and said:

"Our preacher said that on Easter Jesus just swooned on the cross and that the disciples nursed him back to health. What do you think?"

McGee replied, "Dear Sister, beat your preacher with a leather whip for thirty-nine heavy strokes. Nail him to a cross. Hang him in the sun for six hours. Run a spear through his heart. Embalm him. Put him in an airless tomb for three days. Then see what happens."

Of this we can be sure as a verifiable historical fact; Jesus died.

Jesus was buried in a locatable tomb

All four gospels tell us that Jesus' corpse was taken by Joseph of Arimathea, a wealthy member of the Jewish Sanhedrin and buried in Joseph's family tomb. Jesus was not buried in an anonymous grave, but a location where the Roman guards knew, the woman who kept vigil knew and the disciples knew when they ran to it to find the tomb empty.

What's more, Jesus was buried in a sealed and guarded tomb. The Roman and Jewish authorities knew the risk of Jesus' body being stolen and so they ensured it could not happen. So please - none of this rubbish that says that his body was whisked away and hidden.

Jesus Appeared Physically

Jesus appeared to his friends in physical form. For example, the gospels take special care to tell us that his disciples clung to his feet, and that Thomas touched him. The disciples were so astonished by the appearance of Jesus that they had an easier time believing he was a ghost rather than a dead body come back to life. Jesus knows their fear and doubt, and at one point says to them:

Jesus asked them, "Do you have anything here to eat?" They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate it in their presence.

(Luke 24:41-43)

Jesus was no disembodied presence; he was a flesh and blood, living, breathing, and eating reality. Over forty days he appeared to all of the surviving disciples and more than 500 of his followers. Paul reminds the Corinthians of this and says to them, if you don't believe me – talk to them – most of whom were still alive.

Let me add another important fact. Paul says to the Corinthians:

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance...that Christ died....that he was buried...that he was raised on the third day...that he appeared.

(1 Corinthians 15:3-5)

The overwhelming consensus of biblical scholars is that Paul is quoting in the verses that follow a Creed that goes right back to as early as a year to eighteen months after Jesus' death and resurrection. Jesus' resurrection was not a legend that developed over decades, but an historical fact that eye witnesses testified to straight away.

Jesus was Recognizable

While his post-resurrection body was different, Jesus was recognized by those who knew him. In legal terms, they made a positive identification. This wasn't someone pretending to be Jesus; it was him.

There is an old argument that the appearances of Jesus were not real, but simply hallucinations or the disciple's over-active imaginations. They sincerely thought they saw Jesus, but these were cases simply of delusional wishful thinking. But there are many reasons why the belief that Jesus' disciples experienced hallucinations is delusional thinking, including the fact that psychology teaches us that hallucinations are private, not public experiences.

Gary Sibcy is a clinical psychologist. In 2010 he said this:

I have surveyed the professional literature (peer-reviewed journal articles and books) written by psychologists, psychiatrists, and other relevant healthcare professionals during the past two decades and have yet to find a single documented case of a group hallucination, that is, an event for which more than one person purportedly shared in a visual or other sensory perception where there was clearly no external referent.

(Gary Sibcy)

Jesus appeared not just to individuals, but to groups of people, including more than 500 people at one time. It is ludicrous to suggest that so many people on so many occasions were having so many hallucinations.

Jesus was worshipped by his family

Two half brothers of Jesus became key leaders in the early church; James and Jude. James became leader of the church in Jerusalem and wrote the epistle that bears his name. After his resurrection and ascension, Jesus' mother Mary gathered with the early church to pray to and worship her resurrected son:

They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.

(Acts 1:14)

Now my mother loves me. She is very proud of me. She likes to tell stories about me to her friends. She has kept my school report cards. She still uses the awful soup ladle I made for her in grade eight. Greater love hath no mother...

Sometimes she might even exaggerate a little bit about my achievements. If you give her the chance she could probably go on for a solid hour about the many ways I am her number one son. But here is the thing - my mother does not worship me, pray to me or treat me as the son of God.

Mary did all of this for and to Jesus. Her grief at the crucifixion was transformed by the wonder of the resurrection. She did not grieve her son as a dead corpse; she worshipped him as a risen Lord.

Jesus' Disciples were transformed

Before the resurrection the disciples were timid and fear-filled; after the resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit they were bold and courageous – even to the point of dying for their belief in Jesus' death and resurrection. Most famously, Peter the denier became Peter the evangelist. Simon Greenleaf was law professor at Harvard University. He was convinced that the resurrection of Jesus was a myth and set out to prove it using the rules of legal evidence. After painstaking research he came to this conclusion:

It is impossible the disciples could have persisted in affirming the truths they have narrated, had not Jesus actually risen from the dead, and had they not known this fact as certainly as they knew any other fact.

(Simon Greenleaf)

Jesus' church experienced explosive growth

On the same day Jesus died, two other men died on his left and right. Two thousand years later we do not know their names, but the name of Jesus by billions across our world and over the centuries billions have worshipped him as lord and king. Why? Three men died, but only one was raised to life. Charles Moule, Professor of New Testament at Cambridge University said this:

The birth and rapid rise of the Christian Church remains an unsolved enigma for any historian who refuses to take seriously the only explanation offered by the Church itself.

(Charles Moule)

The weight of direct and circumstantial evidence is compelling and all points to the most likely explanation for the empty tomb being that Jesus was truly raised from the dead.

Well, so what? So what if you are convinced that Jesus was raised from the dead 2000 years ago? What possible implications can Jesus' resurrection, as remarkable as it might be, have for me and for you 2000 years later? I want to offer you two words in response; vindication and victory.

Jesus' Resurrection was Vindication

There is a dangerous way we can think of the death and resurrection of Jesus. We can think that the crucifixion of Jesus was a failure and the resurrection of Jesus was the event that righted or overturned that failure. We can easily believe that the Cross is a symbol of failure and weakness and the empty tomb is a symbol of success and power. Such thinking is fatally and tragically wrong.

The Cross and Empty Tomb are the twin symbols of Easter. They cannot be separated. They only make sense together.

The Cross of Jesus is not a failure that is made right by the resurrection. The Cross is a hidden victory that is revealed by the empty tomb. The resurrection makes manifest – makes plain – the victory of the Cross.

The Apostle Paul says this in his letter to the Romans:

(Jesus) was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead.

(Romans 1:4)

The bible says that Jesus was raised from the dead; that is it was not something he did, but something done to and for him. On Easter morning as his body lay lifeless, by the power of the Holy Spirit the Father brought back to life the battered, bruised, life-less corpse of his son. The power of Trinitarian love raised Jesus from the dead and in that moment vindicated all that Jesus had said and done. The resurrection declared the fact that Jesus was indeed who he said he was; the Son of God. And if he was and is the Son of God – then his sacrifice on the Cross for our sins will always be more than enough.

Jesus resurrection is vindication; and...

Jesus' Death and Resurrection is Victory

The writer of Hebrews says this:

(Jesus shared in our) humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil— and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.

(Hebrews 2:14-15)

The death and resurrection of Jesus achieved a once and for all time victory over sin, death and the devil. Right from the beginning of his ministry, Jesus was engaged in a battle with the forces of evil. He began his ministry as the devil tempted him in the wilderness, and it had seemed that his ministry ended when the forces of evil triumphed over him on the Cross. But the Cross is not a symbol of defeat, but of victory.

In the empty cross and empty tomb Jesus vanquished, destroyed, wiped out, obliterated, annihilated, eradicated, extinguished, eradicated, erased, liquidated, nullified, shattered, slayed, vaporized, stamped out and razed the power of sin, death and the devil.

The empty cross and empty grave is Victory! In the empty cross and empty grave death has been swallowed up in victory and the serpents head has been crushed.

Last week I said that that power of sin is like a black hole; sin sucks the life out of us.

In the Cross and Resurrection the opposite happens; the empty cross and empty tomb sucks death out of us.

Columnist Caroline Arends recalls as a child having missionaries come and visit her church when they were on furlough. She remembers one missionary couple in particular. They were serving in a steamy jungle somewhere. Caroline did not remember much of their report, except for one particular story; a story about a snake. Let me read it to you:

One day, they told us, an enormous snake—much longer than a man—slithered its way right through their front door and into the kitchen of their simple home. Terrified, they ran outside and searched frantically for a local who might know what to do. A machete-wielding neighbor came to the rescue, calmly marching into their house and decapitating the snake with one clean chop.

The neighbor reemerged triumphant and assured the missionaries that the reptile had been defeated. But there was a catch, he warned: It was going to take a while for the snake to realize it was dead.

A snake's neurology and blood flow are such that it can take considerable time for it to stop moving even after decapitation. For the next several hours, the missionaries were forced to wait outside while the snake thrashed about, smashing furniture and flailing against walls and windows, wreaking havoc until its body finally understood that it no longer had a head.

Sweating in the heat, they had felt frustrated and a little sickened but also grateful that the snake's rampage wouldn't last forever. And at some point in their waiting, they told us, they had a mutual epiphany. I leaned in with the rest of the congregation, queasy and fascinated. "Do you see it?" asked the husband. "Satan is a lot like that big old snake. He's already been defeated. He just doesn't know it yet. In the meantime, he's going to do some damage. But never forget that he's a goner."

The devil is a goner. The serpent's head has been crushed – it has been decapitated. Evil has been vanquished. In the empty Cross and empty tomb sin and death and the power of the devil has been swallowed up in victory. No longer do we need fear evil. No longer do we need to be enslaved to sin. No longer do we need to be paralyzed by our fear of death. With Paul, because of the empty cross and grave, we can shake our fist at the reality of our own death and shout; 'Where, O death is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting!' By faith, in trusting our lives to God, by believing that Jesus died for our sins on the cross and that God raised him from the dead, we too can share in his victory. By faith his victory can become our victory.

In January 2000, some Christian leaders invited Billy Graham to a lunch so that they could honor him. Billy was then and is now suffering from the frailty that comes with Parkinson disease.

After wonderful things were said about him, Graham stepped to the rostrum, looked at the crowd, and said, "I'm reminded today of Albert Einstein, the great physicist who this month has been honored by Time magazine as the Man of the Century. Einstein was once traveling from Princeton on a train when the conductor came down the aisle, punching the tickets of each passenger. When he came to Einstein, Einstein reached in his vest pocket. He couldn't find his ticket, so he reached in his other pocket. It wasn't there, so he looked in his briefcase but couldn't find it. Then he looked in the seat by him. He couldn't find it. The conductor said, 'Dr. Einstein, I know who you are. We all know who you are. I'm sure you bought a ticket. Don't worry about it.' Einstein nodded appreciatively.

"The conductor continued down the aisle punching tickets. As he was ready to move to the next car, he turned around and saw Einstein down on his hands and knees looking under his seat for his ticket. The conductor rushed back and said, 'Dr. Einstein, Dr. Einstein, don't worry. I know who you are. No problem. You don't need a ticket. I'm sure you bought one.' Einstein looked at him and said, 'Young man, I too know who I am. What I don't know is where I'm going.'"

Billy Graham continued, "See the suit I'm wearing? It's a brand new suit. My family has been telling me I've gotten a little slovenly in my old age. I used to be a bit more fastidious. So I went out and bought a new suit for this luncheon and for one more occasion. You know what that occasion is? This is the suit in which I'll be buried. But when you hear I'm dead, I don't want you to immediately remember the suit I'm wearing. I want you to remember this: I not only know who I am, I also know where I'm going."

Do you know who you are? Do you know where you are going?

Let me introduce myself to you. My name is Stu Cameron, the son of Allen and Jill, the husband of one wife, the father of two children and the friend of at least a few I hope. That gives you some biographical details of my life. But more than this, this is who I truly am. I am Stu Cameron, a son of the Most High God – I am his beloved, wayward, rebellious, sin-stained child who the Heavenly Father pursued relentlessly with his love, even to the point of giving up his perfect Son on the Cross. The perfect Son died so that I, a rebellious son, might live. This is who I am.

And I know where I am going. Not because of what I have done, but because of that God has done. When Jesus died, the grip that sin had over me died with him. And because he lives, I too live forever.