

Resurrection: Past and Present Reality

Anyone who has even the most basic understanding of the Christian faith has probably heard its core message—Christ was crucified and raised from the dead—but many probably do not understand the significance of this proclamation for their lives today. Indeed many Christians today rather naively take Jesus' Resurrection from the dead as a simple historical fact and nothing more. In this article we explore how Christ's Resurrection transcends history and how the death and Resurrection of Jesus impacts our lives today. The theological term is *Paschal Mystery*.

Resurrection in Early Judaism

What do we profess when they say in the Eucharistic liturgy, "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again?" What did the earliest Christians, some of whom were Jewish and others who were inculturated into Christianity through the Jewish synagogue, understand when they professed the Resurrection of Jesus? Our evidence is somewhat sketchy, but by the second century BC, at least some Jews believed in life after death. Two biblical texts can be used as evidence: Daniel, chapters 7–12, and Wisdom of Solomon. Daniel, chapters 7–12, is usually categorized as apocalyptic literature, which was written in response to the violent oppression the Jews suffered under the King Antiochus IV (c. 166 BC). Among the questions that apocalyptic literature addresses are the problem of evil, the justice and sovereignty of God, the rewards of the righteous, and the punishment of the wicked.

In Daniel, chapter 12, the author proclaims Michael the archangel as the guardian of the God's People against the forces of Antiochus IV. He acknowledges that this will be a time of great distress but that those whose names are "written in the book" will escape the persecution. Among those who have already died, some will awaken and live forever. These wise ones shall "shine brightly / like the splendor of the firmament," Daniel says, "and those who lead the many to justice / shall be like the stars forever" (Daniel 12:3). This is a reference to resurrection from the dead, though it is unclear from the context whether Daniel means that everyone will be raised, and then the judgment of good and bad people will take place, or whether only the wise will be raised. He assumes the resurrected will have a material form, though not human bodies as they had in life, and he expects this resurrection of the wise to take place at the end time (see 12:13).

The Wisdom of Solomon was written approximately a century later, in the first century BC, for Jews in Alexandria, Egypt, who were becoming complacent in their observance of the faith. Thus the author of the Wisdom of Solomon writes eloquently about a righteous man who sees himself as a child of God and believes that the destiny of the just is blessed (see Wisdom 2:16). His enemies have a very different view. They believe that life is transitory and haphazard and that when it ends, their bodies will turn to dust and their spirit will spill out like air (see 2:2–3). Their response, then, is to enjoy the "good things that are real" while they can—costly wines and perfumes, crowns of flowers, and reckless parties (see 2:7–9). They use might and power over others as their rule of justice (see 2:11), but the very existence of the righteous man is unsettling to them, because they see his way of life as a judgment against them (see 2:14–16). They decide to test the righteous one by torturing and killing him, because he said that God would defend him and take care of him, and so death entered the world (see 2:18–20,24).

What happened to the righteous one and others like him? The author of the Wisdom of Solomon writes: "They seemed, in the view of the foolish, to be dead; / and their passing away was thought an affliction / and their going forth from us, utter destruction. / But they are in peace" (3:2–3). In truth, their torture and death was a purification, like gold is refined in a furnace, and a sacrificial offering that God took to God's self (see 3:6), so that, in the time of God's visitation, "they shall shine, / and shall dart about as sparks through stubble" (3:7). God's visitation is a reference to judgment at the end time (see 3:13,



14:11). In that time the righteous one will stand before his enemies in judgment, and they will shake with fear when they realize the errors of their thinking (see 5:1–14). They will understand too late that the righteous one is counted among the children of God and the light of justice shines on him (see 5:5–6).

Both of these texts allow for the possibility that at least some Jews living in the first century BC believed in resurrection of the dead at the end time. This view is corroborated by Josephus Flavius, a first-century BC historian, who writes about the Pharisees: They believed "that every soul is imperishable, but that only those of the righteous pass into another body, while those of the wicked are, on the contrary, punished with eternal torment" (Josephus, *Wars*, 2.8.14). Additionally, we learn from the Acts of the Apostles about how Paul started a dispute between the Pharisees and Sadducees over the notion of resurrection of the dead—the Pharisees accepted the idea, but the Sadducees did not—when he was arrested in Jerusalem (23:6–11).

Early Judaism's beliefs about resurrection of the dead are important for understanding Christian beliefs about resurrection, because Christianity emerged out of Judaism. The first Christians were observant Jews—Peter and Paul are prime examples—and the movement soon included Gentiles who were steeped in Jewish tradition because they regularly attended the synagogue and were evangelized in the Gospel ("Good News") of Jesus Christ through the synagogue.

Therefore, before we turn our attention to what the earliest Christians believed about Jesus' Resurrection, let us quickly summarize the views of early Judaism on resurrection of the dead. Essentially, Jewish belief about resurrection was a response to this theodicy question: How are we to understand the justice of God in the face of evil? It was vindication for the wise or righteous who had trusted in God and suffered insult or persecution at the hands of the enemies. This was a bodily resurrection of some kind that would take place in the end time. The resurrected would not retain their physical bodies but they would appear like stars in the sky or sparks darting through stubble. They would enjoy life with God and get retribution by being allowed to judge the wicked.

The Resurrection of Jesus in the Christian Tradition

At first glance the most obvious place to begin our discussion of Christian understandings of the Resurrection of Jesus would be the Resurrection stories in the Gospels (Mark 16:1–8, Matthew 28:1–20, Luke 24:1–53, John 20:1–21:25). Because these stories are familiar to most Christians, we will not go into great detail retelling them here. However, we should note that they are, in fact, post-Resurrection stories. That is, none of the canonical Gospels tell us how the Resurrection of Jesus took place. There were no witnesses to the actual event—only an empty tomb and one or more messengers. However, the Gospel writers tell us what happened *after* the Resurrection that convinced them that Jesus was indeed raised from the dead.

What was their evidence? The Risen Jesus appeared to various groups of people. He appeared to some women and told them to tell the disciples that he would meet them in Galilee, but the women were not believed because first-century Mediterranean cultures did not accept women as credible witnesses (see Luke 24:1–11, Matthew 28:1–10). He appeared to Mary Magdalene who became the first apostle of the Resurrection when he sent her out and she proclaimed to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord" (John 20:18).

The Risen Christ also appeared to the disciples, commissioned them to preach the Gospel and baptize "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," and promised that he would be with them always (see Matthew 28:16–20). He even gave them the ability to forgive sins in the power of the Holy Spirit (see John 20:22–23). He had a resurrected body but it was somehow transformed; his disciples could touch him, he ate food that they gave him, but he could also walk through locked doors



(see Luke 24:36–49, John 20:19–29). People could not recognize him at first, but his identity was made known to them in the breaking of the bread (see Luke 24:13–35).

These stories are not simply a retelling of a past event. Catholic Christians, and some of our Protestant brothers and sisters, believe that we continue to encounter the Real Presence of the Risen Christ when we celebrate the Eucharist today. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, written about twenty years after the death and Resurrection of Jesus, records a very early version of the Eucharistic prayer that is still used today:

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was handed over, took bread, and, after he had given thanks, broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me. For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes. (1 Corinthians 11:23–26)

Whenever we come together for the Eucharist, we remember Jesus' death for the sake of our salvation, we celebrate his triumph over death in the Resurrection, and we await his return in glory at the end time (called the Parousia), when everything will be brought together in Christ and God's Kingdom will be fully realized. Only then will the salvation story be completed, so we wait with eager expectation.

Relevance for Christians Today

In the First Letter to the Corinthians, Paul lays out an extensive and complicated argument concerning resurrection from the dead. When he begins the argument, his motive is not altogether clear, but near the midpoint it becomes evident that the Christians in Corinth accept that Christ was raised from the dead, but they are having trouble believing in their own resurrection, because they cannot imagine what kind of body they will have after death. Simply stated, they recognize Jesus' death and Resurrection as a historical event, but they do not think that it has any implications their present lives or their future destiny. In the course of his argument, Paul will address this question with the eloquence of a great orator and the insight of a person of deep faith.

Paul begins his argument concerning resurrection from the dead with a reminder of the faith tradition that he had received when he first accepted the Gospel of Jesus Christ and that he had passed on to them for the sake of their salvation (see 1 Corinthians 15:1–2). It is a creed that they probably learned in preparation for Baptism and now call to mind regularly: Christ died for our sins and was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures (see 15:3–7).

In the second part of his argument, Paul elaborates on the negative consequences of refusing to believe in resurrection of the dead: Christ would not really be raised, Paul would be testifying falsely against God, their faith would be in vain, and they would still be in sin (see 1 Corinthians 15:12–19, 29–34). What a terrible situation! But at the center point of this part of his argument, Paul emphatically restates the Christian community's belief: "But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who had fallen asleep. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead came also through a human being" (15:20–21). The word *firstfruits* is a Jewish liturgical term, referring to the first and best of the harvest offered to God in thanksgiving and as a consecration of the entire harvest. The phrase "death came through a human being" is a reference to the sin of Adam. The phrase "resurrection of the dead came also through a human being" is a reference to the efficaciousness of Jesus' death and Resurrection.



Finally, in the third part of his argument, Paul gets to the heart of the matter. “But someone may say, ‘How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come back?’” (1 Corinthians 15:35). He insists on belief in a resurrection *of the body*, because there is no triumph over sin and death (the consequence of sin) unless the body that suffered death is now raised (see 15:22–23). But the resurrected body cannot be identical to the physical body either, says Paul, because flesh and bones are susceptible to decay and cannot inherit the Kingdom of God (see 15:50). No, the resurrected body of those who belong to Christ will be a transformed body; the dishonored will be transformed into a glorious body, the corruptible will be transformed into an incorruptible body, and the mortal into an immortal body (see 15:51–54). All this will take place in its proper time, says Paul, when Christ returns (see 15:23–25), and then they will “bear the image of the heavenly one,” who is Jesus Christ (15:49).

As Paul conveys this argument about resurrection of the dead, it is important for us to be aware that he is writing to a church “in the middle” of the salvation story. They know the promise that lies before them and perhaps even experience it in some small measure, but it cannot be fully realized until the end, when Christ “hands over the kingdom to his God and Father, when he has destroyed every sovereignty and every authority and power . . . and [he] himself will [also] be subjected to the one who subjected everything to him, so that God may be all in all” (1 Corinthians 15:24,28). This is why Paul tells the Corinthian community that they must remain firm, steadfast, always fully devoted to the work of the Lord. This message applies to Christians today also. We too are a Church living “in the middle,” so we commit ourselves to the work of the Lord in firm confidence that one day these words will be fulfilled:

Death is swallowed up in victory
Where, O death, is your victory?
Where, O death, is your sting?

(1 Corinthians 15:54–55, see Hosea 13:14)

Participation in the Paschal Mystery: The Life of the Baptized

When we talk about Christians’ sharing in the death and Resurrection of Jesus, we are talking about participation in the Paschal Mystery. The root of this word, *pasch* or *pascha*, refers to the Passover. Orthodox Christians use it to refer to the Easter feast. In our day-to-day lives, we probably do not think much about participation in the Paschal Mystery, but this is what we are called to, if we wish to conform our lives to Christ.

What then does it mean to participate in the Paschal Mystery? Again we must turn to the writings of Paul. In his Letter to the Romans, he writes about the gracious gift of God that comes to us through Jesus Christ, the gift of freedom from the bondage of sin (see 5:15–17). We can almost imagine an impertinent and brazen student shouting out, “If God’s grace flows all the more, then should we not continue to sin all the more?” Paul continues:

Are you unaware that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?
We were indeed buried with him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life. (Rom 6:3–4)



This is Paul's clearest statement on the theology of Baptism. It is also his clearest statement on participation in the Paschal Mystery. In Baptism, he says, we go down into death with Christ and our old self, laden down with sin, is crucified with him so that we are no longer slaves of sin (see Romans 6:5–6). But just as Christ was raised from the dead, we who are baptized now also live with Christ (see 6:8). Like Christ who now lives for God, the baptized must live for God in Christ Jesus (see 6:11).

Clearly Paul does not view Baptism as a one-time-and-done ritual; rather, he sees it as a way of life that flows out of one's participation in the death and Resurrection of Jesus. The old self is now dead because Jesus "died to sin once and for all" (Rom 6:10). The baptized joins with the whole community of believers to reject the slavery of sin and become slaves of God so that they might bear fruit for God (see 6:22, 7:4).

Paul's message is no less true today. If we think of Baptism simply as a ritual our parents and godparents performed on our behalf when we were babies or as any other life passage that is now forgotten, then we have missed the mark. Baptism is a calling and a vocation to live into the meaning of the Paschal Mystery, to die to our own sinful past, and live in the newness of life that is found in Jesus Christ. In this sense it is a life of selfless service in the name of the God who graces us with eternal life.

(The scriptural quotations are from the New American Bible with Revised New Testament and Revised Psalms. Copyright © 1991, 1986, and 1970 by the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, D.C. Used by the permission of the copyright owner. All rights reserved. No part of the New American Bible may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the copyright owner.)

