

The Bones of Jesus and Resurrection Reality

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The recent discovery of “Jesus’ family tomb,” has caused quite a stir. What would it mean to Christian faith if Jesus’ bones had actually been discovered? On Wednesday night, February 28th, we had an interesting discussion of issues raised by this archaeological find. I made some comments about the meaning of resurrection, echoing similar thoughts from other sermons and conversations, which may be disturbing to some people. Because my thoughts on resurrection and faith may be non-traditional, I want to try to clarify them here.

DEPENDENCE ON SCRIPTURE

I have always been **dependent upon scripture** for my understanding of Christian faith. Even as a liberal interpreter of scripture, I still turn to the Bible for wisdom on **all** matters of faith. Though I do not approve of a “proof-texting” approach (i.e., if I can find one verse to support my view, then it is “true”), I am still deeply committed to scripture as a primary means of our knowledge in faith.

THE DISCOVERY OF JESUS’ FAMILY TOMB

I **do not believe** the ossuaries recently discovered in Jerusalem belong to the Jesus of Nazareth, whom Christians revere as the Christ of faith, nor do I believe this could **ever be proven** to any degree of certainty. However, my **faith would in no way be shaken** even if it could be proven, because I believe there is much misunderstanding regarding resurrection, even from a biblical point of view. Below, I defend my view (which is highly biblical) that the resurrection of Jesus has nothing to do with his bones, suggesting that even if his bones were discovered this would not negate his resurrection. (Such a discovery might even enhance what I believe to be an accurate biblical portrayal of resurrection.)

THE PRIMACY OF THE RESURRECTION

*Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and **if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain.** We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of 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, then Christ has not been raised.*** 1 Corinthians 15.12-16

Without the resurrection of Jesus, there would be no Christian faith. Without question, I believe something dramatic happened to the disciples following Jesus’ crucifixion. They experienced the living presence of Christ, still among them. This experience was life-changing, faith-altering – the bible calls it “resurrection.” **I believe in the resurrection of Jesus.** But I am willing to discuss, quite candidly, what “resurrection” is – and what it is not.

RESURRECTION AND RESUSCITATION

Resurrection is not resuscitation. According to biblical testimony Lazarus was resuscitated – his heart started beating again, his lungs were restored, his brain function returned. He was restored to flesh-and-blood life. But a resuscitated person will die again. Christian faith affirms that Jesus was **not** resuscitated to a restoration of flesh-and-blood life. I believe equating resuscitation and resurrection is a common misperception. That Jesus was not resuscitated can be biblically demonstrated by several stories:

*Now on the same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus... while they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him... As they came near the village... they urged him strongly, saying, “Stay with us... So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and give it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and **he vanished** from their sight... Luke 24.13ff*

Flesh and blood bodies do not “vanish.”

*When it was evening on that day... the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, **Jesus came and stood among them...*** John 20.19ff

Conservative interpreters are quick to note the literal nature of this story. Jesus came to them, though the doors were locked. Clearly this was not a flesh-and-blood body.

In the conclusion to this story, Thomas puts his finger in Jesus’ wounds. A liberal interpretation says this story is the **product** of the church (and **not** a literal, historical event), a story that grew in the church’s developing faith, a story meant to convey the power of Jesus “aliveness,” or his “tangible presence” to the disciples. A conservative understanding reconciles a body which can pass through the walls of a house **and** one which can be literally touched, as the product of

the power of God. If God could raise Jesus from the dead, goes the argument, this same God could transform that body into a tangible essence. (I suppose one could argue the reverse: that such a God could also transform a flesh-and-blood body into a form that could pass through walls.) Though I believe this story is likely the product of a developing church, I take the position here that **even from a conservative biblical perspective**, a “spiritual-body-made-tangible” makes more sense than a “flesh-and-blood-body-made-ethereal, for this resonates with what we know of flesh-and-blood bodies (namely, they do not pass through walls).

DUALISM AND THE BIBLE

Another important aspect of this discussion is a proper understanding of “body” and “soul” from a biblical perspective. I believe there is no “body-soul” dualism. In Genesis 2 we read that God created the man from the dust of the earth *and breathed into him the breath of life – and he became a living soul* (Genesis 2.7). God did not “breathe a soul **into** the man.” Human beings **are** living souls. (Greek philosophy (through Plato and others) did introduce a clearly dualistic idea into the mix, but Paul’s opposition to this “Gnostic” thought, can be seen throughout his writings.)

According to Paul’s thought, there is no life apart from the body. The most important part of the human is not some “spiritual essence” contained **within** the physical body. You are a holistic oneness. There is no “resurrection of the soul” when you die, but *the mortal puts on immortality, the perishable puts on imperishability...* (1 Corinthians 15). There is a resurrection of your body – your spiritual body. This is a very difficult concept for most people to understand, for almost all of us have been raised with a dualistic understanding of life after death, i.e., “when you die, your **soul** goes to be with God, etc...” But this is clearly **not** Paul’s view, for he teaches, in the words of the old gospel hymn, when I die, “I’ll have a new body.” Paul speaks clearly of a “physical body” and a “spiritual body.” Life after death is not the life of the soul with God, but the life of the holistic person (still an embodied whole), lived with God in a “spiritual body.”

I do not believe Paul had a clear understanding of what this “spiritual body” was like, exactly. But it is clear from his writing that he believed the afterlife was an **embodied** life. (His view of afterlife embodiment may simply be the logical extension of his non-dualistic theology of the earthly body.) (I believe the real significance of Paul’s thought is **not** for the afterlife, but for this life. Namely, if the soul-within is not the essence of the person, if the soul and the person cannot be separated, then there is no “salvation of the soul” apart from the body. If this is the case, we **must** care about “the least of these,” because feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the prisoner, housing the homeless (Matthew 25) **is** as much about their “salvation” as is preaching “spiritual” concepts. A proper understanding of Paul’s non-dualistic theology would change much about the way Christians viewed their life and faith – in this world and the next.)

Even if Paul did not have a clear understanding of what this “spiritual body” was, he clearly taught that this was reality. And, I believe this is the key to understanding Paul’s view of Christ’s resurrection – Jesus was not resuscitated to a flesh-and-blood body, but was resurrected in his “spiritual body.” (So, I think Paul would adamantly defend a “bodily resurrection,” yet would also demand that this had nothing to do with the bones of Jesus.)

RESURRECTION NOT A UNIQUE EVENT

Christian faith teaches that the resurrection of Jesus was a new event, but I believe Paul teaches us that it is not a **unique** event. Specifically, Christ’s resurrection prefigures **our own resurrection**:

*Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no **resurrection of the dead**, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of 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, then Christ has not been raised.*** 1 Corinthians 15.12-16

Paul clearly links the resurrection of Jesus with the “resurrection of the dead.” Consider also these words:

*But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the **firstfruits** of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ **all will be made alive. But each in his own turn**: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who long to him* (1 Corinthians 15.23ff).

Christ is the **first** to be resurrected, but our own deaths and resurrections will mirror his. We are not concerned about our bones after death – for we know from observation that our bones do not go to be with God, only our new, “spiritual bodies.” If this is so, then we can understand Jesus’ resurrection, which prefigures our own, in the same way.

But some one may ask, “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come? How foolish! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies... There are spiritual bodies and there are physical bodies...” (1 Corinthians 15.35ff).

Christ’s resurrection was in a spiritual body.

FAITH IS FAITH

It has been my hope that in raising an awareness of what resurrection is, and what it is not, we may come closer to the heart of what faith is – and what faith is not. For many people faith must be “fact.” “Proof-texting” of scripture, mentioned above, is based on the need to give absolute assurance to the “facts of faith.” The “**bodily** resurrection” of Jesus is just such a “fact” for many, who regard the “bodily resurrection” as the “final fact,” the “ultimate proof” that “Jesus was who he said he was.” I think this is faulty thinking, not only because it fails even “biblical proof” of resurrection, properly understood (as I have demonstrated, above), but more so because it is the kind of theology that too often falls short in the midst of life’s difficult moments. When the so-called “facts” or “absolutes” do not hold up against life’s very unsure experiences, how can such a faith stand? If Jesus’ bones were to be found, would the salvation he offers be any less real for believers? Would his living example, his commitment, his faith, hope, and love fail, because we found his bones? If faith is based on the bones of Jesus (or the lack thereof), our faith has been built on the wrong foundation – for the discovery of a box of bones will never take away true faith. Because the resurrection cannot be **proven**, it is less than a “fact,” and because it is the ultimate source of hope for millions, it is also **much more** than a “fact.”

I do not want a faith built on facts. (Would this even be “faith”?)

I have suggested, **intending** to be provocative in making this point, that faith is, and should be, more “fiction” than “fact.” Many people, equating “fiction” with “that which is false,” will not be able to understand my meaning. Yet I persist, because I submit that “fiction” (as a category) is far more able to communicate the depth of “Truth” than is “fact” (as a category). How did Jesus convey the deepest truths of life? He did not offer a mathematical theorem, or a scientific hypothesis, verified by testing. When he wanted to convey deep truth, Jesus always told a story (a fictional story). Fiction is a far better vehicle to convey truth than are any bare facts. So, I believe our faith is much better described by our story, our own, personal “fiction,” than by any “fact.”

I believe resurrection is fact. But not “a fact” that could ever be verified by science. It is a “fact” **only** because Christians have, for 2000 years insisted that “he is alive” – that the presence of Christ (“in my life”) is real. With or without bones, who could ever dispute such a claim? This is the only “factual” claim that we ought to seek of Jesus’ resurrection, for the changed lives of millions of believers, lives filled with joy and hope and peace because of the continuing resurrection of Jesus in their lives, is the only “proof” we need. “**Christ is risen, indeed!**”

May we never settle for a resuscitation of bones, when the resurrection of lives is at stake.

May it be so!