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TWO VIEWS OF THE RESURRECTION

Acts 25:13-22

By

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March 31, 2002

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March 31, 2002, Easter Sunday
Acts Lesson 66

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Acts 25:13-22

On December 17, 1903, when Orville and Wilbur Wright finally succeeded in keeping their homemade airplane in the air for 59 seconds and 852 feet at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, they rushed a telegram to their sister in Dayton, Ohio, telling of this great accomplishment. It read: "First sustained flight today 59 seconds. Hope to be home by Xmas." The sister was so excited that she rushed to the newspaper office and gave the telegram to the editor. The next morning the headline stated, "Popular local bicycle merchants to be home for the holidays." The editor botched the scoop of the century because he missed the point.

Sometimes we miss the point because we lack the perspective of history. From our vantage point in history, it seems inconceivable that anybody could overlook the first airplane flight and focus on a trip home for the holidays. The Wright brothers' flight was one of the most significant events in the history of the world, an event that would change the world. But at the time the editor didn't realize the significance of that event.

Incredibly, in spite of the vantage point of two thousand years of history, there are many people who view the resurrection of Jesus Christ just like that editor viewed the Wright brothers' first flight. They don't give much thought to it. Even though it is the most significant event in the history of the world, they shrug it off as inconsequential and go on about life, focusing instead on trips home for the holidays and other trivia. They just don't get it.

Our text reveals two views of the resurrection, the world's view and the Christian view. The apostle Paul was under house arrest in Caesarea, awaiting transfer to Rome. Festus, the governor, had heard Paul's defense before his accusers, the Jewish leaders from Jerusalem. He had asked whether Paul would be willing to go to Jerusalem to stand trial for these charges. Paul knew that he would either be murdered on the way or given a mock trial and condemned. So he exercised his right as a Roman citizen by ap-

pealing to Caesar. But that meant that Festus had to send along the charges that warranted taking this case to Caesar.

As Festus pondered this, his friends, Agrippa and his sister, Bernice, arrived for a visit. Since Agrippa was an expert in Jewish matters, Festus told him about the case to get his opinion. Verses 18 and 19 are Festus' summary of the case to Agrippa. This is shop talk between two rulers. But it reveals the world's view of the resurrection. We will also look at the Christian view, as represented by the Apostle Paul. We see that …

While the world views the resurrection as inconsequential, the Christian views it as the most important fact in history.

1. The world's view: The resurrection is inconsequential.

Catch the flavor of Festus' words: "And when the accusers stood up, they began bringing charges against him not of such crimes as I was expecting; but they simply had some points of disagreement with him about their own religion and about a certain dead man, Jesus, whom Paul asserted to be alive." We could paraphrase, "I thought they were going to accuse Paul of something serious, like murder or treason. But instead they just had some silly dispute about their religion. No big deal—just some dead man whom Paul said was alive."

If a reporter from the Caesarea Daily News had been there, he probably would have reported the "important" news: "Festus and Agrippa Meet. Historic high-level talks between leaders take place in Caesarea." Somewhere down in the middle of the article it might have mentioned that, among other things, they discussed various judicial cases. But Paul's assertion of the resurrection of Jesus would have been skipped altogether. It wouldn't have been considered very important in light of the really "important" news that Festus and Agrippa had met.

Notice four things about the world's view of the resurrection:

A. The resurrection is no big deal.

Festus says that the matters the Jews accused Paul of were "not of such crimes as I was expecting" (25:18). He thought it would be something really important, some matter of Roman law. Maybe Paul was a mass murderer or he had plotted to assassinate

the emperor. Perhaps he was planning a revolution against Rome and was training his guerilla forces in the desert. But then he found out it wasn't anything that important. Just a dispute about some dead man whom Paul said was alive. No big deal.

That's still the world's view of the resurrection. The pope may make the front page on Easter Sunday with his usual plea for world peace. But it's just a human interest story, not really as substantial as the important news, such as the latest exchange between the President and some world leader or the score of yesterday's basketball game. Why get excited about the resurrection of Jesus when there's so much important news to cover?

B. The resurrection is a matter of private opinion.

Festus says, "they simply had some points of disagreement with him about their own religion and about a certain dead man, Jesus, whom Paul asserted to be alive" (25:19). But Festus was at a loss how to investigate such matters (25:20). In effect he's saying, "It was the Jews' opinion against Paul's opinion, one religion against another. Everyone is free to believe what he wants to about religion. And since there's no factual way of deciding between one religion and another, what was I to do?"

That's still the world's way of viewing Christianity and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. "This is a free country. You can believe it if you want to, and I'll believe what I want to. But don't force your religious views on me." After all, religion is a matter of private opinion.

When the outspoken Christian, William Wilberforce, was trying to abolish the slave trade in England late in the 18th century, one of his opponents, Lord Melbourne, angrily commented, "Things have come to a pretty pass when religion is allowed to invade private life." That's the world's view. Other people are free to be religious as long as it doesn't confront me. They can believe what they want, but don't let them dare try to apply their beliefs to my life. The world says there's no way to decide on matters of religion. It's just one subjective opinion versus the next.

C. The resurrection is not factual.

Festus uses a word for religion that can also mean "superstition." He may not have intended that nuance out of courtesy to

Agrippa, who was nominally a Jew. The Greek word comes from two words, meaning "to be afraid of a god or demon." It implies that religion is not something verifiable. It's in the realm of fear of the spirit world, not in the realm of reason or fact.

The world's view of Christianity has not changed much since then. Christianity is seen as one of the religions of the world, no different than any other. All religions are a matter of faith, not of reason or verifiable truth. Evolution—that's science; creationism—that's faith. A recent letter to the editor of our local paper accused right-to-life activists and anti-evolution folks as trying to impose a theocracy on our nation. How dare they think that their views are based on facts! Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, eastern mysticism, Christianity—take your pick or mix and match according to what you like. It has nothing to do with facts. That's the world's view.

D. Jesus Christ was not a unique person.

Festus calls Him, "a certain dead man, Jesus" (25:19). To Festus, Jesus was some Jewish religious leader who went too far and got himself killed. Festus knew that Paul thought very highly of Jesus, but that was about as far as it went. Jesus was just "a certain dead man."

The world still views Jesus that way. Some will concede that He was a great religious leader and a powerful moral teacher. Perhaps they will even call Him a religious genius. But others question whether you can even know the historical Jesus. They contend that it is impossible to separate the real Jesus from the myths that the New Testament writers created. The famous "Jesus Seminar," for example, meets to vote on which parts of the gospels are authentic and which are fables. To the world, Jesus is not unique. The resurrection is a nice, harmless idea, if you care to hold to it. Easter is a fun spring holiday, when we can feel good about life and full of hope because of the new life in nature. But they view the resurrection as inconsequential.

How do you view the resurrection of Jesus? Perhaps for you, Easter is a nice holiday. The kids and the wife get new clothes and the kids hunt for Easter eggs. You go to church as a family, go out to dinner or get together with extended family, and that's about it. It's no big deal. As far as the historical resurrection of Jesus goes,

you can believe it if you like. But you? Well, you believe in your own sort of way. Your view is that if you do the best you can, everything will work out okay in the end.

But to view the resurrection in that way is like focusing on the Wright brothers' trip home for the holidays instead of on their momentous flight. It is to focus on the trivial and miss the most important fact in all of human history.

2. The Christian view: The resurrection is the most important fact in history.

The world says, "The resurrection is no big deal." The Christian says,

A. The resurrection is the biggest deal in history.

In 1 Corinthians 15:13-17, Paul argues that the whole Christian faith depends on the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ:

> But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain. Moreover we are even found to be false witnesses of God, because we witnessed against God that He raised Christ, whom He did not raise, if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; your are still in your sins.

In other words, if you want to discredit Christianity once and for all, disprove the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is the foundation on which all else rests, the domino that makes all the others fall when it is pushed.

The world would not rank the resurrection among the world's most important events. I have a book called *The Timetables of History* (Bernard Grun, Touchstone, 1982). It lists all the great and many not-so-great, but interesting people, facts and events of history in parallel form, so that you can see at a glance what was going on in politics, the arts, religion and philosophy, science, and daily life at any point in history. Interestingly, although it gives an estimated date for the baptism and crucifixion of Jesus, it omits the resurrection. It just ignores the most crucial fact in history by skipping it!

But that's hardly a scientific approach for dealing with what many credible scholars have insisted is historically verifiable!

Paul says that if the resurrection is not historically true, you're wasting your time to be a Christian. It's better to eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die. But if it is true, the resurrection of Jesus is *the* central fact of human history, not some inconsequential event that can be ignored if you choose. It means that He is the risen Lord, and that He has a claim on your life. And if the living Lord of the universe has a claim on your life, it is a very big deal!

The world says that the resurrection is a matter of private opinion. You can believe it if you want to, but don't suggest that others must believe it.

B. The resurrection is not a matter of private opinion, but a fact that confronts every person.

When he was preaching in Athens, Paul stated, "Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead" (Acts 17:30-31). He didn't say, "This is my opinion for those who care to accept it." He said, "God is now declaring that *all everywhere* should repent," because one day all people will stand before the risen Lord Jesus Christ for judgment.

Perhaps you're thinking, "Well, that was Paul's opinion. But how do I know it's true for everyone?" First, you need to realize that this isn't just Paul's opinion, but also Jesus' opinion. Jesus said that the Father "has given all judgment to the Son in order that all may honor the Son, even as they honor the Father" (John 5:22-23, 27). You must either accept the word of Jesus or reject it. There is no middle ground. Either He knew exactly what He was talking about and you must accept it, or He was deluded or trying deliberately to deceive and you must reject it. But as C. S. Lewis pointed out, there is not room for the view that Jesus was just a good, moral teacher. He was a liar or a lunatic or He is Lord of all. It would be a serious mistake to conclude that Jesus was slightly mistaken on a few things, like eternal judgment!

Read the gospel accounts and you will conclude that there is only one option, that Jesus Christ is exactly who He claimed to be. He is obviously not a deluded man nor is He the type of man who would deliberately deceive. He was a man of utmost integrity, who was full of compassion. And yet He spoke words of sober truth concerning the judgment to come. God has furnished proof of Jesus' appointment as the Judge of all by raising Him from the dead. The resurrection is not a matter of private opinion, which you can believe or reject as you like. Rather, it is a fact of history that confronts each person with the sober reality that one day you will stand before the risen Lord Jesus Christ, either as your Savior or as your Judge. Before you die, you must choose which it will be.

I mentioned that there is proof of the resurrection. The world says that the resurrection is not factual or verifiable. It's just a subjective religious idea. But the Christian view is:

C. The resurrection is based on factual, verifiable evidence.

Festus points to this when he states that Paul "asserted" Jesus to be alive (25:19). Paul didn't say it might be true or that he hoped it was true or that he believed it was true regardless of the evidence. He asserted it to be true. He wasn't presenting speculation or subjective religious ideas that warm the souls of all who are simple enough to believe. He was presenting testimony as an eyewitness of the risen Christ.

Paul had met the risen Lord Jesus on the Damascus Road, and his life was turned around. He had been a rising young Jewish leader, bent on persecuting Christians and stamping out this pernicious new teaching. He had a promising future, status in the community, a good living ahead of him. But he gave it all up when the risen Lord Jesus confronted him that day.

"But," you say, "that could have been a hallucination. Many people have such mystical experiences." But what about the changed lives of all of the other apostles? They all were depressed, disappointed men who were not expecting a resurrection. They easily could have returned to their former occupations and slipped quietly out of sight. They had nothing to gain and everything to lose by their testimonies to the resurrection. Yet they suffered beatings, went to prison and many were killed because of their tes-

timony that Jesus Christ was risen from the dead. They were all men of honest character and integrity, who did not profit financially, but rather gave up everything, in their role as apostles. Why else would not only the twelve, but Paul and thousands of other early Christians live as they lived, unless they knew, based on abundant eyewitness testimony, that Jesus Christ was risen?

If they were all deluded, you still have to explain away the empty tomb. If Jesus' body had been in that tomb, as soon as the apostles began preaching the resurrection, the Jewish leaders could have produced the body and ended the foolish myth right then. But clearly, there was no body to be found. The tomb was empty.

If Jesus' enemies had stolen the body, they would have produced it immediately. If the Roman guards had been bribed to hide the body elsewhere, it meant their lives when the Jewish leaders protested to their commander. The Jewish leaders never accused the Roman soldiers of stealing the body or of allowing it to be taken by the disciples. Rather, they accepted the guards' testimony concerning the resurrection and then bribed them to keep quiet (see Matt. 28:11-15). If the disciples somehow stole the body, then they would have slipped quietly away and forgot about preaching the gospel, especially once persecution began. Why give your life for something you know to be a hoax, especially if it's not going to make you rich or famous?

There is clear, compelling evidence that the bodily resurrection of Jesus is a fact of history. And the Jesus who arose is not just "a certain dead man," no different than other religious leaders.

D. Jesus is the unique, eternal Son of God.

The hundreds of Old Testament prophecies, the unique events of His birth, His life, His teaching, the miracles He performed, and His death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven all bear witness to the fact that Jesus is not a mere man, but that He is God in human flesh, the unique, eternal Son of God. When He died in accordance with the Scriptures, His death was unique in that He was the Lamb of God who took away the sin of the world (John 1:29). He was the fulfillment of what the sacrifices in the Old Testament typified.

When you stand before God (and we all will!), either you will bear your own sins and face God's judgment, or your trust will be in Jesus to bear your sins. If your trust is in Jesus' death for you, God's holy justice has been satisfied and He will welcome you into heaven. If your trust is in anything else, including your good works, you will face God's judgment for your sins on that day.

Conclusion

The real issue is right here. Most people do not reject Christ because of a lack of evidence. The Jewish leaders in His day had plenty of evidence. People reject Christ because they don't want to turn from their sins and selfish ways. They want to cling to their pride that tells them that they are good enough to get into heaven. Their pride convinces them that their good works will merit eternal life. But the Bible declares that none of us by our good works can earn a place in heaven (Titus 3:5).

This morning you are the editor. The story has come across your desk: "Jesus Christ is risen from the dead; children hunt Easter eggs; restaurants crowded on Easter Sunday; retail sales climb ...." You must decide which story is trivial and which is crucial. Will you, like the Ohio editor in the Wright brothers' day, ignore the crucial and focus on the trivial? Or will you face the most important fact of history, that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead, and put your trust in Him as your Savior and Lord?

Discussion Questions

1. Someone tells you, "It's fine for you to believe in Jesus, but I have my own beliefs that are valid for me." Your response?

2. If Christianity rests on a fact of history, where does faith fit in? Why is it necessary?

3. Some say, "It doesn't matter what you believe, just so you believe in something." But why is it crucial for our faith to rest on the facts about the person of Jesus Christ?

4. Some believe in Christianity as long as it "works" for them. But if trials hit, they turn elsewhere. How does an understanding of the resurrection counter this shallow approach?

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