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## ***The Resurrection: Fact or Fable***

Acts 17:1-4

Easter Sunday – March 27, 2005  
Northway Christian Church, Dallas, Texas

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The sun and the moon are each 32 miles in diameter and just 3,000 miles from the earth. Australia is not “*down under.*” Its residents do not hang by their feet. The space program is a hoax, scripted by the science fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke. Things like the moon landing, the space shuttle, the Mir Space Station and the Hubble Telescope are all just tricks being used to prop up a dying myth – the idea that the earth is round.

All thinking people know this. Moses did. Jesus did. Christopher Columbus did. George Washington did. Winston Churchill did. Joseph Stalin did. Franklin Roosevelt did. And the United Nations still does. Just take a look at its official seal and you will see what the world really looks like: it’s circular and flat as a pancake; the North Pole is at its center, and around its outer edge lies the southern ice, reputed to be a wall 150 feet high that no one has ever ventured past.

Such are the settled convictions of the Flat Earth Society, or the “*Zetetics*” as they like to be called. They’re committed to the search for truth and the denial of “*imaginary*” theories. They have resolved to live by only “*provable*” facts. They publish magazines: The Flat Earth News, The Last Iconoclast, and Plane Truth, they have a headquarters, a president and even a listing of meetings around the world where like-minded people can get together to exchange ideas. But most of them will require you to submit an application before attending a gathering so as to eliminate any cranks or crackpots from getting in. And the way we view the Flat Earth Society is the way that many people view the church.

Odd, irrational, ignorant, uninformed, kooks – that’s how we’re often thought of as Christians. And the case against us is made by pointing to things like what we have come here this morning to celebrate – the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The skeptics and critics would invite us to go for a stroll with them through the graveyard across the street this morning. They would point out the fact that there are lots of dead people buried over there, and that not one of them has ever been raised. It just doesn’t happen, and to say otherwise is not only silly, it’s cruel. It’s wishful thinking that fosters false hopes, and to say otherwise is to ignore the facts. And if we’re honest with ourselves, we’d have to admit that it’s not just those outside the community of faith who think like this. Sometimes it’s even us too.

The very fine preacher John Killinger began one of his Easter morning sermons by saying –

*I have a confession to make to you. For years, on Easter Day, a little voice somewhere inside of me has said, "This is all make-believe. It isn't real. You are pretending to believe something you don't really believe."...Some people may be shocked at this admission, but I know that I am not alone. Some of you have felt the same way. You feel a little guilty at admitting it, as I do, but the truth is that you have always been a little skeptical about the resurrection.... It seems like a great big fairy tale at the heart of the Christian Faith... (145)*

Tony Campolo in one of his books says that when his son was just a little boy that he asked him what it means to have faith, and he quickly answered by saying, *"Faith is believing stuff that you know isn't true"* (17). So, is that us this morning? Is this just an annual spring meeting of the spiritual flat earth society?

I 'm struck every time I read Acts 17:1-4, our Scripture lesson this morning, by its description of the absolute confidence that the early Church had in its proclamation that Jesus Christ had been raised from the dead three days after His agonizing crucifixion. The Catholic philosopher Peter Kreeft points out that *"the resurrection of Christ was central to every sermon (that was preached) in the book of Acts"* (151). And in our text this morning from the book of Acts, we're told that the Apostle Paul didn't just preach the Risen Christ to that synagogue in Thessalonica, but that he *"argued," "explained," "proved" and "persuaded"* them that *"it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer and to rise from the dead."*

You see, for Paul, the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead was not some unsubstantiated claim or inconsequential detail in his presentation of the Gospel. The Resurrection of Jesus Christ was his Gospel. And so he wrote to the Corinthians, *"If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is void of content and your faith is empty too... If Christ was not raised, your faith is worthless. You are still dead in your sins... If our hope in Christ is limited to this life only, then we are the most pitiable of all people"* (15:14, 17, 19). And the evidence he offered in support of its claim were the empty tomb and personal encounters with the Risen Christ, including his own.

You see, the claim of the resurrection of Jesus Christ was not some fragile, secret belief that had to be protected by the early church. It was the presupposition of Christianity. *"It was the theme of every Christian sermon; it was the motive of evangelism; and not one line of the New Testament was written... not one sentence, whether of Gospels, Epistles, Acts or Apocalypse, was penned apart from the conviction that He of whom these things were being written had conquered death and was alive for ever"* (Stewart 104-105). So, were they fools for saying this? Are we fools for believing it?

Paul didn't think so. At that synagogue in Thessalonica he was confident enough about it to be able to reason with them about it, and to explain it, and to offer proofs for it, with the result that some of them were finally persuaded to accept it for themselves. And I think that it's important for us to know this, especially here this Easter morning. Those first Christians didn't demand

decisions of faith without reasonable grounds. They invited inquiry into and reflection about the things that they claimed.

And so it is that this morning I've listed for you in the Sermon Notes section of the Order of Worship the eight things that I think need to be reviewed in any consideration of the historical validity of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. William Lane Craig, a professor at Talbot Theological Seminary in Southern California says that these are the Biblical assertions that are "*widely accepted*" by scholars today as having historical validity (32).

Now, there was a time when I would have told you that I thought that these "*facts*" by themselves proved the resurrection. Today I'm much more comfortable saying that I think that these "*facts*" make the resurrection "*plausible*." It seems to me that plausibility and credibility rather than proof and certainty are the more appropriate categories for the claims of faith. And so, just as I don't think that we are asked to make rash decisions of faith without reasonable grounds, neither do I think that faith can be forced or compelled by careful, cogent arguments.

I'm not sure that I could ever convince you or anybody else of the truth of the resurrection beyond all doubt by clever arguments, but I'm pretty sure that I can show you that there are good solid reasons grounded in both history and logic for thinking that the resurrection of Jesus Christ really happened. And if I can persuade you of that much, then the foundation is in place for the only really persuasive argument for the resurrection of Jesus Christ that I know anything about.

Dr. Craig in his frequent debates with skeptics of the resurrection always begins by making a rather substantial case for the intellectual credibility of the historical evidence for the resurrection. But in his closing statement he always shifts ground by telling the personal story of his relationship with the Risen Christ. In one of those debates he concluded by saying –

*So if you ask me why I believe Christ is risen from the dead, I would not only point to the historical evidence, but I would reply in the words of the old hymn, 'You ask me how I know He lives? He lives within my heart!' Now somebody might say that I'm deluded. But that's where the historical evidence comes in. In the absence of any good, compelling historical reason to deny the fact of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, it seems to me that it's perfectly rational to believe in Christ on the basis of His living reality in my life. (65)*

This morning before I left the house I turned the cross in our front yard around so that now it reads, "*He is Risen!*" And that's the content of my Easter Faith. I believe it happened. But more importantly, I believe it matters. Every word that Christianity speaks – the word of forgiveness, the word of personal transformation, the word of hope, the word of deliverance, the word of victory – are words that are rooted and grounded in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Every promise we make to people as a church, every invitation we extend, every assurance that we give, rises or falls on Christ's resurrection. And so for the next

few weeks I'm going to be drawing out some of the implications of our conviction that Jesus Christ was raised from the dead on the third day. But behind these promises of spiritual Easter I believe that there is the reality of physical Easter. And it's important for us to know that we aren't odd, irrational, uninformed, ignorant kooks for believing that the tomb was empty and that Christ was raised on the third day.

In Nikolai Arseniew's book Mysticism in the East there is a story told about the atheistic days of the Soviet Union. In one of Moscow's largest assembly halls a communist leader made a presentation on the foolishness of Christianity and the absurdity of the church's claims. And when he was done he asked if there was anyone in the audience of more than 7,000 people who thought that he or she could refute what had just been argued. And a young, newly ordained Orthodox priest awkwardly stood up and came forward. The Communist speaker looked with disdain at the young cleric and told him that he had two minutes, no more. "It won't even take that long," the young priest explained. And turning to the audience, in aloud, clear voice he said "*Christ is risen.*" And with one voice they roared in reply, "*He is Risen indeed!*" (Manning 124). The proof of Easter is not just the evidence that Christ was raised from the dead on the third day in that Jerusalem tomb; it's the evidence that He lives in our hearts.

## Sources

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