

“Paul’s Proof”

1 Corinthians 15:1-21, 50-58

Simply this: Jesus was resurrected. Truly.

1 Corinthians is a letter to the community of believers founded by Paul on his second missionary journey. They have a lot of problems and Paul writes to them as their “senior pastor.” This letter was written in AD53 or so, probably from Ephesus. The heart of their problems is their denial of the resurrection of the dead, their own resurrection and, thus, Jesus’ actual, bodily

resurrection. Understandably Paul brings his long letter to a climax on the issue of resurrection.

There are two questions that swirl around the topic of resurrection:

1. What do we mean by “resurrection”? Wasn’t Lazarus “resurrected”? If so, what’s so special about Jesus’ “resurrection”?
2. How important is it that Jesus was truly resurrected? He was a wonderful, even unique, example to us all, showing us the way of love, peace, and justice. Isn’t it enough that we strive to be like him, to do what we think Jesus would do? Surely, his path of self-sacrifice is a powerful lesson to us all. Wouldn’t Christianity be fine if we let go of the oft-embarrassing claim that Jesus rose from his tomb and later ate some fish with his disciples? Do such claims have any place in our modern, science-driven world?

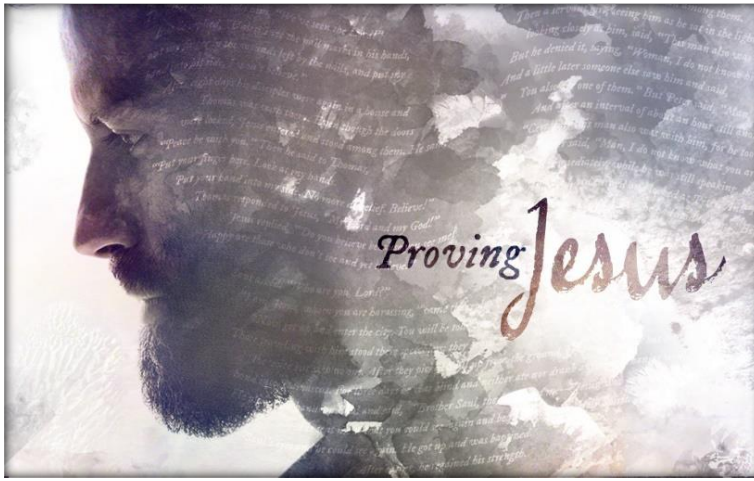
It may surprise you to learn that such questions were on the table among the first believers in the decades after Jesus. The Corinthian Christians would probably say they were on fire for Jesus, but Paul knew that their enthusiasm was a mile wide and an inch deep. They prized certain spiritual gifts, such as speaking in tongues, above all else. They had mistakenly concluded that this new religion was all about the spirit, and that what they did with their bodies didn’t matter. Their physical bodies would be left behind soon enough when their souls flew home to be with God. Sadly, in their fervid embrace of the “spiritual” they had come to an over-spiritualized sense of themselves and of the gospel. Sounds pretty much like the American landscape in the early 21st century.

But most astoundingly to Paul, they had even come to deny that, one day, all people would be resurrected just as Jesus had been resurrected. Paul knew that their denial of bodily resurrection¹ (and there is no kind of resurrection that isn’t bodily; it is what the Greek word meant) underlay all the other mistakes they had made. Thus, all of Paul’s lengthy letter to them, which we know as 1 Corinthians, builds to the climactic argument for Jesus’ resurrection and our own in chapter 15.

Resurrection?

But let’s not get ahead of ourselves. What did Paul and the others mean by resurrection? The answer is straightforward. Resurrection was the passing through death to newly embodied life on the other side of death. Not becoming a ghost or one of Homer’s shades or a spirit or anything else that lacks materiality. The Greeks had a word for resurrection, *anastasis*, though they knew that it didn’t really happen, for they, like us, understood that the dead stay dead. However, Jesus and many of his fellow Jews believed that when the long-awaited Day of the Lord arrived, the kingdom of God would be ushered in and all the dead would be resurrected. Saying “bodily resurrection” would be redundant, for bodily is what resurrection means.

¹ The “big” book on the resurrection is N.T. Wright’s, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*. It is a massive volume with which anyone who wishes to deny the resurrection (or deny that it means bodily!) will have to contend for years to come. Another of Wright’s books also deals with these subjects and is much more accessible to laypeople: *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*. I recommend both.



It is easy to get confused here, because this can sound a lot like what we call “resuscitation.” Thus, sometimes, people mistakenly think of Jesus’ resurrection as some sort of resuscitation. When Jesus brought Lazarus back to life (John 11), it was a “resuscitation,” much like someone being brought back to life after dying on an operating table. Lazarus was brought back to life as he had known it and he went on to age and die just like everyone else. The same was true of all the others brought back to life in the Bible. They returned to their families and, hopefully, lived out a full and godly life. But Jesus was not brought back to life. Instead, he was taken forward to newly-embodied life, i.e., resurrection.

To put it differently, Jesus was not restored to the life and to the body he had known. Rather, Jesus passed through death to new life and a new physicality. Jesus no longer had a “soulish” body (*soma psychikon* in the original Greek) but a “Spirit-filled body” (*soma pneumatikon*), as Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 15:44. See page four for more on this. It may seem a bit technical but it is really important. Truly.

In their stories about the risen Christ, the Gospel writers don’t try to explain the nature of Jesus’ resurrection; they simply relate what happened. Jesus was recognizable, though his appearance was slightly altered. He ate, but appeared on the inside of a closed room. His body was not the same sort of body he had before death; it was transformed into a new sort of body. But it was still a body, still material, still capable of eating broiled fish (Luke 24:26-43).

The proof

But how important is Jesus’ resurrection to our faith? Let’s put it as plainly as Paul did in his letter to the Corinthians: If Jesus was not resurrected then we Christians are to be pitied, for we would have placed our hope and trust in a lie. If Jesus was not resurrected then there is no Christianity. The resurrection is the evidence, the proof, on which all our claims rest.

To grasp this we have to go back to the women who arrive and find Jesus’ tomb empty on that Sunday morning in Jerusalem. Alarmed. Terrified. Amazed. Afraid. Those are the words that Mark uses to describe the reaction of the women to the empty tomb. Terror? You can be sure. I’m sure that each woman would have had trouble putting her frightful surprise into words. Some surprises are clearly occasions for joy, others for sadness. But sometimes, like the women’s surprise on that Sunday morning, there is only confusion and anxiety and fear.

At first glance, none of this makes sense to us. We think to ourselves, it’s Easter morning! Christ is risen! Alleluia! How could alarm and terror characterize the women’s experience?

To understand their fear, there are a few things we need to keep in mind:

- Among first-century Jews, there was no expectation of a suffering, much less crucified, Messiah. The Messiah was to arrive in power and might and wonder and glory to cleanse the temple, expel the pagans, and restore God’s kingdom. The fact that Jesus ends up dead on a cross could only mean that he wasn’t the Messiah. Wonderful and beloved rabbi, yes. Prophet, yes. But the Messiah could never meet such an end . . . or so everyone believed.
- And if there was no expectation of a dead Messiah, there couldn’t be any expectation of a resurrected Messiah, or for that matter the resurrection of any single person until all were resurrected on the Day of the Lord. The ancients knew what we know; namely, until such a day comes, the dead stay dead.
- Thus, when the three women arrive and find the stone rolled away, their only thought would be that someone had beaten them to the tomb, either to take Jesus’ body or to desecrate it.

Yet, despite all this, the disciples proclaimed to the world that Jesus of Nazareth, this crucified Nazarene, had been resurrected and, thus, was not the failure and disappointment that he had seemed on that Friday at Golgotha. Instead, he was what he claimed – God’s Messiah and, indeed, the Lord God incarnate.

But Jesus’ closest friends and disciples were not the only witnesses to the truth of Jesus’ resurrection. In Paul’s letter, written only twenty-five years after the resurrection, he tells the resurrection-denying Corinthians that hundreds of people saw Jesus after his resurrection and that most of them are still alive. Go find them and

ask! Further, Paul tells them the great truth that we too can sometimes forget – if Jesus was not resurrected, then we’ve believed a lie and are to be pitied for it. For if Jesus was not resurrected, there is no Christian gospel to be proclaimed. And we, alongside all humanity, still lie dead in our sin. Paul knows full well that without the resurrection, Jesus was just another failed would-be messiah executed by the Romans, no one’s savior.

Our own resurrection

But Paul doesn’t stop there. He pushes the Corinthians further. Just as Jesus was raised, he writes, so shall we all be raised. Paul uses a harvest analogy: Jesus is “the first fruits of those who have died” (v. 20). One day, the resurrection harvest begun in Jesus will be completed. Paul understands that we are naturally curious about this future resurrected body and in portions of chapter 15 he strives to find suitable analogies, though he knows that the effort will fall short. It is foolish even to speculate. All Paul knows is that as Jesus died and was then resurrected, so shall we die and then be resurrected upon Jesus’ return. Our resurrected body will be like Jesus’ resurrected body. Like Jesus, our mortal bodies will one day put on imperishability. This is the victory God gives us through Jesus Christ.

If this all seems just a bit too fantastical and even weird to you, consider our affirmation of Jesus’ resurrection. That doesn’t seem so fantastical only because we’ve gotten used to the idea. But once you’ve accepted as true the claim that Jesus was resurrected and walked out of the tomb after having died . . . well, then everything is on the table. Being a Christian actually takes a big imagination, a mind and heart that refuses shrink God into a small box that seems “reasonable” to us. Perhaps it is time for us to be unreasonable Christians!

“Physical/natural body” v. “Spiritual body” in 1 Corinthians 15:44

Whenever readers come to 1 Corinthians 15, they are nearly always confused by, and often misled by, the regrettable translation of verse 44: “It [our body] is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body” (NRSV; “natural” in the NIV). Understandably, we assume that Paul is contrasting our current natural or physical, i.e., material, body, with a resurrected spiritual, i.e., non-material, body. This is how we are used to understanding words like “physical” and “spiritual.” But this translation leads us to exactly the wrong conclusion about Paul’s meaning. Indeed, it is the very mistake that the Corinthians made and Paul was trying to correct!

Richard Hays at Duke Divinity School is widely recognized as one of the foremost Pauline scholars of our day. In the following passage from his 1 Corinthians commentary in the Interpretation series, he helps us to see what Paul is actually saying in the Greek about our resurrected bodies. He writes:

Whereas our present bodies are “sown” (in this life) perishable, dishonorable, and weak, the resurrection body will be raised (in the next life) imperishable, glorious, and powerful (vv. 42–43). Paul thus produces an impressive piece of visionary preaching, extolling the glories that await us. He is seeking to make the resurrection of the dead seem appealing rather than appalling to the Corinthians.

Yet the last item in this sequence is the one that he is driving toward: “It is sown a natural body [psychikon sōma], it is raised a spiritual body [pneumatikon sōma]” (v. 44, NIV). This is the nub of his argument. This last contrast, however, presents a vexing problem for translators (cf. 2:14, where the same contrast occurs). The phrase psychikon sōma is notoriously difficult to translate into English. The NRSV’s translation (“physical body”) is especially unfortunate, for it reinstates precisely the dualistic dichotomy between physical and spiritual that Paul is struggling to overcome. In any case, psychikon certainly does not mean “physical.” Furthermore, although pneumatikon sōma is easier to translate, “spiritual body” sounds like an oxymoron. What sense are we to make of this?

By far the most graceful translation of verse 44, and the one that best conveys the meaning of Paul’s sentence, is found in the Jerusalem Bible: “When it is sown it embodies the soul, when it is raised it embodies the spirit. If the soul has its own embodiment, so does the spirit have its own embodiment.” That is Paul’s point: our mortal bodies embody the psychē (“soul”), the animating force of our present

existence, but the resurrection body will embody the divinely given pneuma (“spirit”). It is to be a “spiritual body” not in the sense that it is somehow made out of spirit and vapors, but in the sense that it is determined by the spirit and gives the spirit form and local habitation.

There has never been a great heresy around the doctrine our own bodily resurrection., which we affirm in all the great creeds. It is almost as if we have simply forgotten the witness of the Scriptures to this truth. The most likely cause was the regrettable embrace of too many of Plato’s ideas by the early, largely Gentile Christians who tried to make Plato and the Good New fit together . . . but they don’t. Yes, yes, yes, one day we will be resurrected just as Jesus was and our new, transformed, glorified bodies will be the same as his, so that we can enjoy all of God’s restored creation.