

“Alleluia, Christ is Risen”

John 20:1–18 (NRSV)

Yes, Jesus has risen!

The apostle Paul knew he was regarded a fool by many who heard him. A crucified king? Ridiculous. Resurrected? Foolishness. But as he wrote, “the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom.” I’m reminded of a story from Fleming Rutledge:

A story was told me recently that might be apocryphal but might well be true. The two people in question, both clergy, are very well known in the American church. One of them is a prolific writer of skeptical books calling the orthodox faith into question. The other is a famous preacher of the gospel. The skeptic, seeking to provoke the preacher, says, “My daughter has two Ph.D.’s. How can I expect her to believe anything so unacceptable to the modern mind as the resurrection of the body?” The preacher says, thoughtfully, “I don’t know your daughter. How limited is her imagination?”¹

True wisdom requires an expansive imagination, humility, and an ever-deepening knowledge of God. And so, we turn to our story of resurrection . . . our true story.

At the tomb

Jesus was crucified and died on the Friday afternoon of Passover week. After his death was confirmed by the Roman soldiers, who were undoubtedly quite competent at execution, Jesus’ body was claimed by a prominent member of the Jewish Council, Joseph of Arimathea. Jesus’ body was taken to Joseph’s family tomb where it was laid out on a stone slab.

The women would have prepared Jesus’ body as best they could before sundown on Friday, the commencement of the Jewish Sabbath. No one, not even women, could touch a dead body on the Sabbath without necessitating a week’s worth of purification ritual. Because their work had been rushed, the women returned to the tomb very early on Sunday, after the Sabbath was over, to finish their work of wrapping and scenting the body.

As John tells us in his account, Mary, a woman from Magdala (hence, she was known as Mary Magdalene), arrived and found that the tomb had been opened. She evidently believed, and understandably so, that someone had opened the tomb and made off with Jesus’ body. Ancient peoples knew as well as we do that dead people stay dead.

It is important to remember that no one, absolutely no one, would have expected a resurrected Messiah, for no Jew expected a crucified Messiah. Indeed, the fact that Jesus had been crucified could only mean that the disciples had been quite wrong and now had good reason to fear for themselves.

So, after running to get help, Mary sat outside the empty tomb and wept, believing that someone had stolen the body of her beloved Jesus.

But, of course, that is not what had happened. Jesus’ body was not stolen; it was resurrected by God. Jesus now enjoyed a newly embodied existence. As Christians we affirm the truth of this astounding claim: that on the third day² after his death on the cross, Jesus was bodily resurrected.



¹ From Rutledge’s sermon on the resurrection of the body in *Exploring and Proclaiming the Apostles’ Creed*, Ed. Roger van Harn (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

² The claim isn’t that 72 hours elapsed, but simply that Jesus died on a Friday and was resurrected on a Sunday—three days: Friday, Saturday, and Sunday

Resurrection?

Most Jews of Jesus' day believed that God would bodily resurrect all the dead when the last days arrived and God put all things to rights. However, most Jews would not accept the claim that God had resurrected this one man only, this Galilean Jew who had died a humiliating death by crucifixion.

The Greeks, too, spoke of resurrection, *anastasis*, but they believed it could never happen. They could conceive of resurrection, but they just didn't think it could happen for, indeed, it never had. For Greek and Jew alike, resurrection meant newly embodied life after death. It would be like Achilles returning from Hades or Joshua from Sheol.³

There is one point here about which we need to be *absolutely clear*, for I hear Christians getting this wrong all the time.

We are *not* talking about resuscitation, being brought back from the dead to return to one's life (as on a modern-day operating table) and still having to face death. That was Lazarus: Jesus brought him back to life, but Lazarus returned to his home, aged, and died. The same is true of all the people in the Bible who are brought *back* to life.

In contrast, we claim that Jesus was resurrected by God, not merely resuscitated. He passed *through* death to a life after death (Friday evening to early Sunday morning) and then to newly embodied life on Sunday. Resurrection is about the restoration of the whole person—body and soul, we might say. Resurrection puts back together what death ripped apart. After his resurrection, Jesus walked with his disciples and even asked one to touch his wounds. He ate fish with them so they could see that he was still “flesh and bone” (Luke 24:36-49). Transformed yes, glorified yes . . . but still Jesus with a material body. He will not face death again. And his resurrection changes everything.

A world put right

In the New Testament, Jesus' resurrection is neither the place of God's victory over sin and death nor the climax of the story. Rather, the victory is won by Jesus' faithfulness all the way to his death on the cross. Jesus' faithfulness even in death makes us “at-one” with God.

The resurrection then is the *proof* that this is so. The resurrection demonstrates that Jesus was who he claimed to be, not merely another failed would-be messiah who met a bad end. The resurrection is the vindication of Jesus and is the truth claim on which Christianity stands or falls.

N. T. Wright once put it this way. “Let's make no bones about it: if Easter isn't good news then there is no good news. But if it is – if it is true that Jesus Christ is risen indeed – then Easter Day, and the Easter message, is the true sun which, when it rises, puts all other suns to shame.” Alleluia! Alleluia!

Daily Bible Readings This week:

More on the resurrection

Monday	Mark 16	<i>Mark's account of the empty tomb</i>
Tuesday	Luke 24	<i>Luke's account of the resurrection</i>
Wednesday	Matthew 28:1-10	<i>Matthew's account of the resurrection</i>
Thursday	Acts 17	<i>Paul uses the resurrection as the proof of his claims</i>
Friday	1 Corinthians 15:1-11	<i>The resurrection of Jesus</i>
Saturday	1 Corinthians 15:12-35	<i>The resurrection of the rest of us!</i>

³ These are the abodes of the dead in these ancient cosmologies.