

The Resurrection of Christ in the New Testament
Re-Catechism Pascha 2010
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Christos Anesti! Tonight I have the pleasure to speak to you about the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. But I must confess that I had difficulty in preparing for this talk because the Resurrection cannot occur without a Crucifixion. You might say, it was like being asked to write part II of something before writing about the part I; like talking about a birth and delivery without the labour. So allow me to spend just a few minutes to discuss the meaning behind the crucifixion and then proceed to talk about Jesus' resurrection in the New Testament.

The first generation of Christians, like all Christians from that time till today, were certain that Jesus' death had an overwhelming effect on their lives; an effect so great that their lives changed completely. What happened on the cross to so impact the lives of millions from that day until today?

The Crucifixion

According to John Drane, five things can be said to have occurred on the cross¹: first, that Jesus battled the forces of evil. The purpose of Jesus' whole life was to win a victory over the powers of Satan, who is the author of disobedience and therefore the author of suffering, sin and death. Through total obedience to the will of God, and by willingly subjecting himself to the Cross-, Jesus until his last breath proved himself to be victorious over Satan. But, what kind of victory was it? What did we win? Oscar Cullmann, used the following WWII example to explain what happened on the

¹ John Drane, "Understanding the Death of Jesus" in *Introducing the New Testament*, (San Francisco: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1986), p. 83.

cross. He explained that war always has a decisive battle before the war is over. There is always a battle that changes the course of history. In WWII that decisive battle was D-Day. Thus, the day of Jesus' Crucifixion is the Christian D-day. The final day of victory in WWII was V-Day. But for us Christians, V-Day has yet to happen. We are still at war with evil forces, and wait the finally victory at Jesus' second coming.² But the decisive battle has already been fought. The tide has turned and Satan will fall, because of what Jesus accomplished on the cross.

The second thing that occurred on the Cross is that Jesus revealed to us the depth of God's love. As our Triune God is one and indivisible, then in the suffering and death of Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, both God the Father, and God the Holy Spirit also had to be there in some sense. God did not order some third party person to suffer and die for us. God, himself, picked up our cross and suffered and died for us. For God so loved the world, that God sent himself down to earth to be born and to die for us.

The third thing that occurred on the Cross is something that I spoke of before during the Catechism I series, with my talk on "Sacrificing/Offering like Jesus". Jesus became a sacrifice to reconcile us to God. Throughout the Old Testament, people sacrificed to God in order to offer a *gift* to their deity; they sacrificed in order to offer *respect* to their Lord; they offered sacrifice as a form of *apology* for sins and offences; their offerings were a form of *communication* (sharing a meal with God); and finally they offered a sacrifice as an act to receive *life*. In the past it was believed that by releasing the life from the offering, it was transmitted back to the

² Oscar Cullmann in John Drane, *Introducing the New Testament*, (San Francisco: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1986), p. 84.

giver of life and then it was granted upon the worshipers.³ But the Sacrifice of Jesus was the Sacrifice of all Sacrifices. In Jesus, we are reconciled to God, and we Orthodox Christians participate in this great Sacrifice by receiving Holy Communion.

Fourth, Jesus paid the price of sin for us. He paid our debt or another way of saying it is that he paid our ransom. When Adam and Eve disobeyed God all of humanity became hostage to sin, evil and Satan. We became slaves to sin, and the ransom that Jesus paid on the Cross was the price needed to be paid to set us free. So there is an exchange that happens, and we change hands: from slaves of sin, we become adopted children of God.

The fifth and final thing that occurred on the Cross is that Jesus died in our place. Simply stated, Jesus on the cross did something for us that we are unable to do for ourselves: pay the true price for our sins, and reconcile us with God. Many hear this and in their minds picture a cruel judgmental God in a court of law passing sentence to ensure justice, but that is not how God acted. Rather, Jesus' suffering is to be understood in the context of a family, where the justice sought is that "of a father who is broken hearted and eager to restore his children to their proper place."⁴ God did not pass judgment on Jesus. What God did was "share in the cross the final and extreme consequence of our sinfulness."⁵ God didn't send someone else to fix our problem. God, himself, came to fix our problem.

But how was God going to show us this? How was God going to make us see, that this Jesus of Nazareth was not just another human who was blessed by God; that he was not just a prophet

³ Robert J. Daly, S.J., *The Origins of the Christian Doctrine of Sacrifice*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), p. 2.

⁴ John Drane, *Introducing the New Testament*, (San Francisco: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1986), p. 90.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

anointed by God; or a great teacher educated by God; but was actually the word of God made flesh? How was God to show us that this Jesus of Nazareth was indeed, Himself? And the answer lies in the Resurrection.

It has to first be said, that even though Jesus talked about his resurrection in parables and metaphors, none of his followers expected what happened next to actually happen. Jesus was crucified and they thought that's it. If they survived and lived through all of the hullabaloo that was going on around this time of Jesus' execution, that once the dust settled and things calmed down, that they would again return to their homes and life would carry on. But the hullabaloo didn't end.

Biblical Evidences

When we read the resurrection accounts from the four different gospels, what we are given are four different "witness accounts" to a particular historical event. Some details may not match up, but that is normal among all witnesses who have seen the same thing. Some details are added some omitted. In a police investigation, one witness may say, "gray jacket", another will say, "Light blue coat". But the police are able to use all of these variances, as we can see when watching crime drama's on television, to come to their conclusions when investigating a scene. And with the various resurrection accounts we are able to come to **two** conclusions. First, that there is an empty tomb. No one witnessed the actual resurrection occurring. Unlike the rising of Lazarus just before, here no one saw the dead Jesus actually get up and walk. The closest description that we have is in the Gospel of Matthew 28:2 which reads, "And behold a sever earthquake had occurred, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled away the stone and sat upon it." And in verse 4, "and the guards shook for

fear of him, and became like dead men.” All the icons depicting the Resurrection that we have show Jesus breaking out of the tomb, but no one saw this and these depictions are open to artistic interpretation. The fact is that when the women, one, two, three, four or more went to the tomb, they found no one in it. Had that been the only evidence we would draw the conclusion that the body was stolen, and they themselves came to the same conclusion. In John 20:15, Mary Magdalene encounters Jesus and mistaking him for a gardener, asks, “Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have laid Him and I will take Him away.” Even after encountering the Angel Mary doubts the message and seeks for Jesus’ body, yet no one, not even Jesus’ enemies were ever able to produce a body.

But that is not the only evidence. The women were given a message from an angel, or two angels, telling them that Jesus rose from the dead and to tell the disciples. The women then go and tell the disciples, some of them go and tell the disciples, one of them go and tell the disciples. It doesn’t matter how many went, sooner or later at the end the disciples are told. Peter and John in total disbelief run back to the tomb to find the grave clothes lying completely undisturbed, evidence that no robbery had taken place. The next evidence is that Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene, and comforted her because she was totally beside herself with grief believing that Jesus was stolen. It didn’t matter to her what the angel said. Her Lord is missing. When she asked him for the missing body, he calls her by name, “Mary, Mary,” and she then recognized him. We get a sense in reading these accounts that these events were completely and totally unexpected. The disciples and the women were shocked by them, disturbed by them, and were unable to make sense and understand them. Their behaviour is not consistent with that of

people who plot to steal a grave and then invent the story of the resurrection.

But the most important evidence is that Jesus did appear. He appeared, and spoke and was touched by Mary Magdalene. He appeared, spoke, and ate with two followers on the road to Emmaus. He appeared, spoke and was touched by his disciples in the upper room with Thomas actually putting his finger in Jesus' wounds, and again on the shore where he ate with them. Does this sound like a stolen corpse to you? Does this sound like a dead man to you; who appears and speaks and is touched and eats? Jesus appears again to his disciples and now breaths upon them. Only living beings can breath. The disciples had a real encounter with an actual, physical body. They did not see a vision. But the skeptics say that he only appeared to his followers, and they probably made the whole thing up, or were so grieved that they were seeing things as they were drinking away their sorrows. Is it possible for 12 drunken men and 3 grief struck women to hallucinate something like this? It would be highly unlikely but not totally impossible. If we only had the four gospel accounts the skeptics may have gotten away with that explanation. But the New Testament is greater than those four books, praise God for that.

St. Paul, one of the greatest persecutors of the early Christian Church, talks of his conversion to Christianity. He recounts how he was knocked off his horse and saw, and heard Christ speak to him. Paul was the last person on the planet who would have wanted to conspire with Christians to validate their claims of a risen Jesus. But he saw him, and he converted. And he wasn't alone. In 1 Corinthians 15:6 Paul makes reference to over 500 people witnessing the risen Jesus at one time. The chances of this being mass hallucination is no longer highly unlikely it is downright impossible. John Drane writes, "The fact of Jesus' resurrection must

have been considered to be so widely believed, that the people who wrote the Gospel stories did not even think it important to marshal all the evidence for it. As with the rest of the narratives, they used only a small selection of the material that was at their disposal.” (p. 101). Jesus rose from the dead, and for forty days there were numerous eye -witness reports to this fact.

These events, these evidences of Jesus’ bodily resurrection changed the disheartened, and downcast disciples, who once hid themselves in fear of the authorities, changed the weeping and heartbroken women who once trembled before the angel messengers, and transformed them in a mere seven weeks into a strong united group of firm believers and courageous witnesses that formed the core of the newly born church. As C. H. Dodd explained it, they boldly set out to proclaim the kerygma (declaration), the gospel, the message: that Jesus of Nazareth has fulfilled the Old Testament promises; that God was at work in his life, death and resurrection; that Jesus has now been exalted to heaven; that the Holy Spirit has been given to the church; that Jesus will come again in glory; and that all who hear this proclamation *must respond* to its challenge.⁶ At the heart to the disciples witness was this proclamation that Jesus was alive and active, and was working even now through them. The risen Jesus had changed them. Moreover the risen Jesus was not just something they preached and proclaimed: He was something worth dying for. And I have never met someone who was willing to die for something that they didn’t fully believe in.⁷ And this is why the early Church survived the horrific persecutions during the final 300 years of the Roman

⁶ C.H. Dodd in John Drane, *Introducing the New Testament*, (San Francisco: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1986), p. 99.

⁷ John Drane, *Introducing the New Testament*, (San Francisco: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1986), p. 103.

Empire. Even for those Christians who had not seen the risen Jesus, they believed in Him and He was still worth dying for.

The eye witnesses of the risen Jesus later became known as the Apostles and the Equal-to-the-Apostles. This was the qualification to being an apostolic preacher. The apostles of the Church were the witnesses of the Resurrection, and it is upon their authority that the teachings of the Church are built upon. And Paul spoke on behalf of all the Apostles and the members of the early church when he stated that if the reality of Jesus' resurrection was denied the Christian faith would be meaningless: "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins."

Why would it be futile? Did not the Crucifixion pay for our debt and remove our sins? Well, not if a mere man died on the cross. Only God could intervene on our behalf, and the resurrection was the evidence needed to bear witness that Jesus is Lord and his Crucifixion was not a random act of violence, but the loving act of God intervening in history for our salvation. Through his resurrection, Jesus' claims to be one with the Father, the Son of God, the Light, the Way, the Truth, were all shown to be true. In Act 2:36 St. Peter on the Day of Pentecost said, "God has made this Jesus whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah". Without the Resurrection Jesus would have been viewed as many non-believers see him today, as just a good teacher, philosopher, man. For the followers of Jesus, the resurrection was not a mere happy ending following the tragic death of a teacher whom they loved and respected. It was the high point of the whole of Jesus' life, and the proof of the grand claims that he had made for himself during his ministry. Without a doubt in any of the witnesses' minds, Jesus ... was ... divine. Jesus ... was ... God.

For St. Paul, the events of Pascha, and especially the resurrection, were crucial in bringing in God's new society. The

early Christians realized that the only way that a human being can be truly transformed is to be given a new life force, and they found this in the resurrected Jesus. If Jesus had the power to change himself, to raise himself from the dead and be alive again in the real world, then he has the power to raise us up and give us life as well. Paul wrote in Galatians 2:20, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me”. St. Paul meant this literally, and he tried to explain what he meant through Baptism. In Romans 6:1-11, Paul said that when Christians are buried in water they are buried as Jesus was, and when Christians rise out of the water, they are resurrected as Jesus was, and undergo a change. Their old self, their ego self dies, and is replaced with a new life, with Jesus Christ living inside of them. John Drane says, “Paul was quite sure that without the resurrection, the cross would have been nothing more than an interesting theological talking-point... But because of the resurrection, Paul had discovered a new life”⁸ a life with Jesus living within.

But Jesus did not only claim that **he** would be with **us**, he also promised that **we** would be with **him**. He claimed that he goes to prepare a place for us in his Father’s kingdom, and that if this were not true, he wouldn’t have told us so. He taught that his followers would share in his glory and be given eternal life. This “eternal life” is understood on the one hand as God dwelling in us in this world, and on the other hand, us living with God beyond this world, in the age that is to come. Jesus’ resurrection did not only prove that he was divine. It did not only prove that he would change our lives in this world. It proved more than this. Jesus’ resurrection proved, that as God, his promise and pledge that all his followers will survive death and rise from the grave as he did to live life eternally, is also true. In 1 Corinthians 15:20 St. Paul writes that the

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

resurrected Jesus is “the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep” meaning that we are expected to one day follow. Jesus’ resurrection provided us—men, women, and children alike, rich and poor, slave and free—with the way to not only come to know God, but to unite with him forever. Christos Anesti!