

The Empty Tomb: Why The Resurrection Matters

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<http://www.christusrex.org/www2/art/images/rembrandt12.jpg>

"I am constantly amazed that many Christians find this confusing... If we have grown up believing and teaching something else, it's time we rubbed our eyes and read our texts again. God's plan is not to abandon this world, the world which he said was 'very good.' Rather, he intends to remake it. And when he does, he will raise all his people to new *bodily* life to live in it. That is the promise of the Christian gospel."

- N.T. Wright, *Simply Christian*, 219

"In a culture that evades telling the truth about death, the teaching of the resurrection comes as a blast of fresh air."

- Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, 279

I. Cross, Death, and Resurrection: An Apocalyptic Event

- The cross, death, and resurrection stand in the center of history as God's pinnacle act to rescue God's creation (Matthew 27:62-28:20; Mark 16:1-8; Luke 24:1-53 [Acts 1:1-11]; John 20:1-21:23).
- Do we tend to focus more on the suffering, cross, and death of Jesus while implicitly subjugating his resurrection from the dead?

II. A Key Text: 1 Corinthians 15

- Note that Paul's teaching on the resurrection comes at the end of his letter – perhaps at a climactic point of his argument.
- It is possible that all of the practical matters to which the apostle attended up to this point were merely symptoms of the larger problem of denying the bodily resurrection.

(a.) General Outline of Paul's argument:

- I. Introduction: The gospel teaches that Christ was raised (15:1-11)
- II. Question 1: "If Christ is preached as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? (15:12-19)
 - a. Christ has been raised and, therefore, all who belong to him will be raised (15:20-28)
 - b. If the dead are not raised our suffering and faithfulness are futile (15:29-34)
- III. Questions 2 & 3: "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?" (15:35-58)
 - a. Response to question #3: The resurrection body (15:35-49)
 - b. Response to question #2: The dead and the living will be transformed (15:50-57)
- IV. Concluding Exhortation: Stand firm, for your labor is not in vain (15:58)

(b.) A huge translational issue: *psychikon soma* vs. *pneumatikon soma* (v. 44).

- (i.) Options for translation: "natural body" vs. "spiritual body"; "physical body" vs. "spiritual body"; "embodying the soul" vs. "embodying the spirit" (the latter is perhaps the better translation).
- (ii.) A Crucial Question: Paul seems concerned to respond to the kind of body there will be in the resurrection. So, does Paul display a dichotomy between the material and the spiritual?

Is the physical, material world something from which we must be freed, or is it something that God wants to transform and redeem?

(iii.) Paul is mapping the current state of the community onto the narrative of Jesus: At the moment their lives are characterized by dishonor and suffering, but like Jesus there is a “postponed glory” awaiting them in the resurrection of the body.

(c.) Paul’s use of the Old Testament in 1 Corinthians 15:

(i.) Psalm 14:1 in 15:36

(ii.) Genesis 1 in 15:38-39; Genesis 1:27 in 15:45-47; Genesis 2:7 in 15:45

(iii.) Isaiah 25:8 in 15:54

(iv.) Hosea 13:14 in 15:55

III. We Are A People Threatened With Resurrection

(a.) Mark’s ironic ending: Mark 16:1-8

-Mark’s gospel ends with the Greek word *gar* (“for”) in v. 8, which leaves the reader hanging without a “fitting” conclusion.

-Perhaps the theological point that Mark is trying to make is that the reader/hearer is left with the reality of the resurrection and invited into the story. It remains to be seen what he/she will do with this information.

-See Julia Esquivel’s poem, “They Have Threatened Us With Resurrection.”

IV. Reflections for Teaching and Preaching/Questions for Discussion:

(a.) The Resurrection affirms the redemption of the created order.

-There is not a single aspect of God’s creation that is undesired. What might the ramifications of this be?

-What does God’s commitment to creation say about our tendency to make Christianity all about our “personal experience” and entrance into heaven?

-How do we preach and teach this faithfully in our congregations?

(b.) The Resurrection affirms the moral significance of the body.¹

-For Paul, the resurrection has definite moral consequences in the present. What might it mean to embody the resurrection life now? How does affirming the body and the material world affect the way we live practically?

-How do we communicate this in a context that tends to separate the spiritual from the material (and even attribute positive connotations to the former and negative ones to the latter)? Indeed, how do we teach that the body is *not* a negative entity to be shed at Christ’s second coming? Also, how does this affect the way we teach about sexual ethics?

(c.) The Resurrection testifies that we are a people who are “threatened” with a future resurrection of the body.

-How might our actions change if we are confident that one day God will raise our bodies just like Jesus?

-How might preaching the resurrection of the body put us at odds with our culture?

(d.) The Resurrection declares that we are a people actively participating in God’s New Creation (see 2 Corinthians 5:11-21, Galatians 6:14, etc.).

-There is a promise still on the horizon toward which we are moving.

-What might it mean for us to participate in New Creation? Does this have significance for how we care for creation now (recycling, trash pick-up, carbon emissions, etc.)?

¹ Points (a.) and (b.) are adapted from Richard Hays’ reflections in his commentary on 1 Corinthians. See Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians* (Interpretation; Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1997), 278-281.