

Easter 3 2016
Resurrection Sermon 2.

“The resurrection is something that can *only be believed*’. Over the years quite a few people have made this statement. What they mean is that because the biblical assertion of the bodily resurrection of Christ Jesus and other people is something we have not experienced then it is something that, if you want to be a Christian, has to be believed. Now I want you to note the way ‘belief’ is being used here. Belief is set up as the opposite of reason: when we don’t have a reason for thinking something may be true we resort to believing it is true. But I want to suggest to you that, understood aright, beliefs are connected to reasons and are not, therefore, irrational. The following examples that illustrate what I mean come from the realm of physics.

Physicists tell us that matter is made up of particles they call atoms, protons, and muons, and probably even smaller particles. They are able to detect many of these particles on instruments. But physicists also theorize that the kind of matter we can detect only makes up a small percentage of all the matter there is. The bulk of matter in the universe, in fact five sixths of all matter, they label as ‘dark matter’. Our instruments cannot yet detect dark matter but the study of gravitational waves, among other things, leads scientists to postulate the existence of dark matter. So as you sit there now you are made up of particles that we can detect and particles of dark matter that we cannot detect. Now it seems reasonable to assume that the particles of dark matter will obey some kind of physical laws, as do the particles we can detect, but they may be different physical laws. But the question is this; is it reasonable to believe that dark matter exists given that we cannot detect it and do not know how it behaves?

Another example is the ‘big bang’ theory. This theory speaks of a ‘singularity’ characterised by a high density and high temperature state when, for a micro period, the laws of physics did not exist. The universe we know came into existence as particles were generated in this situation. What there was before this so-called ‘singularity’ was nothing. Where this ‘singularity’ came from we do not know. We do not know why it appeared. The ‘big bang’ theory has come to be widely regarded as the way the universe came into existence and people do not seem to have any problem believing it. Nor do they believe it is irrational.

The point that I have been trying to make in citing these examples is that although we cannot detect dark matter, and although no one was present at the ‘big bang’, we don’t think that it is unreasonable to believe these things. We do not think it is unreasonable to believe these things because there

seems to be evidence that points to some kind of event in which the universe and space and time began out of nothing. At this point let me ask you a question. Let's assume that I say to a physicist working in this field, "I haven't seen dark matter or a 'singularity' so I think what you saying is just nonsense." What do you think the physicist would say? I assume she would start talking about the evidence – evidence that in many ways has to be indirect.

It is possible to think about the resurrection as a 'singularity' in which the laws of physics as we know them were inoperable and different laws were operable in the way particular matter was transformed. This 'singularity' was the divine act that constituted the resurrection of Jesus as the event that 'expands into the resurrection of all the dead. If it is possible to think this way we need to ask what are the reasons for thinking that a resurrection event occurred? But before we deal with this question we need to be clear that in talking about resurrection the New Testament is talking about a resurrection in which a person has a body. Paul is quite clear that the resurrected Christ has a body, and he is quite clear that those people who have died will have a resurrection body. What this means at a minimum is that the resurrection involves the presence of matter.

In the witness of the early church there are two independent strands of evidence about the resurrection of Jesus. One strand is the tradition of Jesus' empty tomb, and the other tradition concerns the appearances of the risen Christ to the disciples. Discussing the appearances first, it is clear that soon after Jesus' death it is reported that Jesus appeared *over a period of time* to individual disciples and other people associated with the disciples. It was these appearances that originated the Christian faith. This does not tell us what sort of experiences these appearances might have been, but it does tell us that some kind of historical event took place in which Jesus made himself known to people after his death.

At this point I should deal with an objection to the account of these appearances that has been made many times. It is the claim that the appearances were produced by the overwrought and grieving imaginations of the disciples. The claim is that they were a psychological reaction to Jesus' death. The problem with this attempt to explain the resurrection as a subjective mental event is that, according to the New Testament, the appearances did not all occur at once. They occurred at different times at different locations. If the appearances had happened at the one time to all the people then one might think that they were the result of mass hysteria. But that they occurred at different times and different locations and to different individuals makes this theory doubtful.

The second independent strand of tradition about the resurrection of Jesus is the empty tomb. That the tradition about the empty tomb is trustworthy is supported by the fact that there was an early Jewish polemic that claimed that Jesus' followers had secretly removed his body from the grave and hid it somewhere else. This story was designed to discredit the Christian claim that God had raised Jesus from the dead. But why did they need to invent such a story if the tomb was not empty as the early Christian tradition asserted? Surely you would only make such a claim if the tomb were empty.

So what we have as evidence of the resurrection are two independent traditions - the empty tomb tradition and the appearance tradition. While the two strands of evidence are not knock down arguments proving that Jesus was raised, they are arguments that strongly support the reality of the resurrection. It seems reasonable, then, to believe that Jesus was raised from the dead until contrary evidence appears. What does need to be rejected is the claim that because we have no experience of resurrection, this lack of experience is evidence that the resurrection of Jesus did not happen. The fact that I have no experience of dark matter, the fact that I am not aware of dark matter particles passing through my body right now, does not count as evidence that there is no such thing as dark matter.

It might be asserted, finally, that a resurrection is impossible because it is contrary to the laws of nature. But the truth is that we only ever know a *part* of the laws of nature. Only at the end of the history of the universe could we completely know the laws of nature. Furthermore, as the 'singularity' called the 'big bang' shows these laws may in extreme circumstances, be contingent.

Next week I am going to look at what Paul has to say about the bodily nature of the resurrection of the dead and the resurrection of Jesus.

Ross Carter
Easter 3, 2016.