

How Can Life Follow Death?
1 Corinthians 15:1-8, 20
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 Michael Carey

What a gorgeous weekend we're having! Thank goodness we didn't have to implement the backup plan—pass out blankets at the sunrise service! How many of you thought spring would never arrive? I was worried that on Thursday the Lord would say "April Fools" and send another cold front. This year "March madness" was *not* about basketball!

Easter is a day to enjoy nature. Yet it's also a day to ponder whether God is above nature, supra-nature...whether God could and would do the super-natural. There's a lot at stake today. Please turn to 1 Corinthians 15 in your Bibles; Mark's eyewitness account from the women who discovered that Jesus' tomb was empty. Though it may have been a beautiful day, it says that "they were afraid." When he began his response to the Corinthians' questions about Jesus resurrection, the Apostle Paul acknowledged that everything depended on that empty tomb...

¹Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. ²By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.

"Hold firmly to this gospel...this good news; otherwise you have believed in vain." If you can't trust this supra-nature/supernatural news, there's no point believing in Jesus.

Before we read further, let's consider what it takes to "hold firmly" to this message. Maybe like me you went through a period of questioning whether Jesus' resurrection even happened. Maybe you're still having such questions. Mine peaked when I was in college. I tried to keep them hidden, but sometimes they showed. Once an English professor asked our class, "If you could go back in time, what time period would you choose?" I said, "29 A.D." She's thinking, "What happened in 29 A.D.?" Then a light came on, and she said knowingly, "That's right, you're thinking of becoming a minister."

But she had it wrong. My yearning to go back to 29 AD wasn't a sign of faith, but a sign of doubt. Though I was thinking about going to seminary, I was struggling with questions. The biggest: "How can dead bodies come back to life?" I yearned to see the risen Christ myself.

I mean everybody "knows" that dead bodies don't come back to life...right? Scientists base this knowledge on "the principle of analogy." You can't "know" something that has no historical precedent; you can't claim something that can't be demonstrated in an experiment. There can't be any trustworthy knowledge above the natural world, no supra-natural...unless you **accept the possibility that God can change His rules!** If there is a God, and if God created the natural order, then God can speak the Word in order to break or even change the order of things if He wants to. Even scientists now acknowledge that Einstein's Theory of Relativity shows the universe isn't nearly as fixed as once thought. I came to the place where I decided that God can change His rules. I hope that your mind is also open.

Then you've got to decide whether you can trust the eyewitnesses. Paul knew that this was huge. That's why in verse 3 he wrote:

³For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, ⁵and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. ⁶After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, ⁸and last of all he appeared to me also...

Like you and I, Paul didn't know Jesus till after his resurrection. Paul didn't see the empty tomb; he had to trust the eyewitness accounts of the heavy stone rolled away...Roman guards like zombies...empty grave clothes laid out with care. Paul had to trust Peter, the Twelve, James, the apostles, the more than 500 who beheld his resurrected form. Of course, several years later Jesus appeared to Paul himself.

So after accepting the possibility that God can change His rules, you've got to **assess the eyewitnesses' credibility**. I started this in college and continue to turn over stones, and my amazement continues to grow. These people went to their death claiming that they saw him—not some wispy spirit but a new kind of body—he ate and drank with them, yet he appeared and disappeared from their midst. None of them ever said “We made it up,” even under duress. If it was a conspiracy, it's the only one that ever succeeded!

As you're assessing the eyewitness testimony, what jumps out are two words: “*Christ died.*” For Jews, that's an oxymoron, a self-contradictory phrase like “fine mess,” “airline food,” or “adult male.”

We're used to saying “Christ died.” But in the 1st century AD, this was a contradictory statement. Christ was the Greek name of the long-awaited Messiah, who would liberate the Jews and bring God's righteous rule to earth. To get yourself killed *proved* that you weren't the Christ. Often when a charismatic leader challenged the *status quo*, disciples would say “he's the Christ, the Messiah.” And when the leader got noticed, Roman soldiers nailed him to a cross. Then the followers would say, “Definitely not the Christ;” and they'd look for another.

This happened repeatedly in the 1st century AD, until Jesus came along, got called the Christ, got crucified, and then they said, “Don't look for another—Jesus is the Christ, he is a crucified Christ.”

Something happened that convinced them that despite his pathetic death, Jesus was the all-powerful conqueror. The simplest explanation: God changed His rules...created a new order, by raising Jesus from the dead. That's why in verse 20 Paul writes with confidence, *but Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep*. There's no past precedent, only eyewitnesses who saw the birth of a whole new future.

The more that you assess them, the more you'll find the eyewitnesses to be credible. Yet it's easy to wallow in your questions. At the end of the day, to believe fully, you must **act courageously on what you can believe**. Without being willing to take action on it, you can't receive it.

In Surprised by Joy, N.T. Wright imagines what would happen if a college were given a Renaissance masterpiece, but had no place to hang the large framed canvas. They wouldn't be able to receive the gift unless they were willing to tear down walls and renovate a building. In the same way, you simply can't receive Easter hope unless you are willing to let God tear down the limits in your head and heart. As Bishop Wright wrote,

To put it at its most basic, the resurrection of Jesus offers itself...not as an odd event within the world as it is but as the utterly characteristic, prototypical, and foundational event within the world as it has begun to be. It is not an absurd event within the old world but the symbol and starting point of the new world. (p. 67)

This new world of resurrection is life that never ends, joy that never fades, and love that never ceases. And the way you know it for yourself is to invite God to birth resurrection in you; and to live Jesus' life yourself. That's probably why one of the greatest philosopher's of the 20th century Ludwig Wittgenstein, wrote that "it is love that believes the resurrection." (Culture and Value, p. 39). He wasn't talking about love for family and friends; it's only natural to love your own kind (most of the time). Instead I think what Wittgenstein meant was that the best way to believe the resurrection is to follow Jesus in blessing your neighbors; when we love sacrificially you will experience God's joy, and you will just *know* that the source is the living Lord Jesus!

Have you seen "The Blind Side?" It's the true story of Michael Oher, a homeless teenager who, despite many raised eyebrows, was taken in by Sean and Leigh Anne Tuohy, a very privileged Christian family. The grace and guidance they provided brought Michael out of his shell, fostering his academic achievement and his football prowess. Now Michael Oher plays professional football for the Baltimore Ravens.

And according to the Tuohy's, bringing Michael into their home brought their family together. In one scene in the movie, it's Thanksgiving Day. They load their plates with food and rush back to the couch to watch football on TV. Michael puts a little food on his plate and goes to the dining room table. Seeing him, Leigh Ann grabs the remote, turns off the TV, and moves the family around the table. They hold hands and say grace. Later, Sean asks his wife, "Why are you smiling?" She answers, "I'm happy." He then asks, "Does Michael have anything to do with it?" And she says, "Michael has everything to do with it."

It's when we love boldly that we see things clearly, and enjoy life fully. That's because God is love and Jesus has been raised from the dead, not an absurd event within the old world, but the starting point of a wonderful new life.