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The final chapters of each of the four New Testament Gospels recount events which occurred after Jesus' resurrection, continuing through until His ascension as described in detail in Acts 1.1-14. Then throughout the book of Acts we have many examples of what lay at the heart of the apostles' preaching, namely the Person and Work of Jesus Christ, culminating in His foul death and glorious resurrection (egs., Acts 3.12-15; 4.2,10-12; 10.41; 13.30; 17.3,31; 26.8; 25.19; 26.8). The message for us all is clear: the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ is a central, crucial foundation stone of the whole Christian Faith, giving us irrefutable evidence that Jesus is telling the truth.

In that famous passage in I Corinthians 15.12-19, the Holy Spirit explains, through Paul, the significance of the resurrection. If Jesus did NOT rise from the dead: Christian preaching is in vain; Christian faith is in vain; Christian preachers are liars and false witnesses; we are still in our sins; those who have "died in Christ" are lost; and if our hope in Christ only applies to this life, with no prospect of anything beyond this life, then "we are of all men most miserable".

In this sceptical age it is important to remember that Christ's resurrection is not just a comforting doctrine for Christian hearts, but a crucial self-standing fact in its own right and hence an effective weapon for Christian heads also! In discussions with Christ-rejecters, we simply ask them how they explain the resurrection: in response, they are obliged to come up with plausible, naturalistic, non-miraculous explanations as to what actually happened on that resurrection morning.

Any such naturalistic explanation has to deal convincingly with three awkward facts at the heart of the matter: one, the tomb was empty; two, the claimed post-resurrection appearances of Jesus; and three, the transformation of the disciples from dithering cowards to "these that have turned the world upside down" (Acts 17.6b), even to the point of eventual martyrdom for ten of the original twelve disciples.

Here are six common naturalistic explanations we are likely to come across in one form or another: one, Jesus was not dead, He only swooned on the cross, and revived in the cool air of the tomb; two, a "look-alike" substitute for Jesus was found who was duly crucified in Jesus' place; three, the tearful, grieving women went to the wrong tomb, a new, open, unused tomb, so they assumed from its emptiness that Jesus had risen from the dead; fourth, the claimed appearances

were only hallucinations on the part of distressed followers of Jesus who could not cope with the reality of His death; fifth, Jesus' body was removed by the authorities, to scotch any talk of His resurrection; sixth, Jesus' body was removed by His disciples, so they could point to the empty tomb as being evidence of His resurrection.

Limited space here prevents our examining each of these explanations in the light of "the three awkward facts" - the empty tomb, the appearances, and the transformation of Jesus' followers – but it is well worth each of us doing this examining ourselves.

To get started, we shall consider just one of the explanations here, "the swoon theory". This ignores the scourging that Jesus had already undergone (Matthew 27.26), which was often fatal in itself; Jesus was too weak to carry His cross (Luke 23.26); He then spent six hours of agony on the cross; a spear was thrust into His side, with the issue of "blood and water" (John 19.34, strong medical evidence that death had occurred, with the clotting of blood along with watery serum).

His body was then wrapped in thin linen strips with spices, difficult for a fit man to escape from let alone someone in Jesus' state. Then there was the great stone rolled across the tomb entrance - for Jesus to roll back Himself?! – and the guards placed outside (Matthew 27.62-66). Assuming that somehow Jesus did emerge from the tomb, He would have needed much nursing care for many weeks: is it really plausible that He and His followers genuinely believed He had miraculously risen from the dead?

And then what happened to Jesus afterwards? Was He quietly convalescing nearby while Peter and John and the others got started on preaching Jesus and His resurrection? Beside these particular difficulties of this theory, we see that it fails to explain the empty tomb, and is seriously far-fetched regarding the post-resurrection appearances and the transformation of the disciples. The evidence clearly indicates that Jesus was properly dead.

Thanks be to God, we find that none of the other common resurrection-rejecting theories mentioned above does any better. We can be sure, in our hearts and in our heads, that Jesus' resurrection is historical fact in itself – and that changes everything. Our belief in Him, as our Risen Lord and Saviour, is in response to the facts rather than in the face of the facts.

May there be boldness on our part in making these things known, for eternal destinies are at stake (Acts 4.13, 20-21).

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