

HOW DO YOU EXPLAIN EASTER?¹

I'd like to raise the question with you today of how we explain Easter. I invite you for the next few minutes to get "down and dirty" with that you really think really happened with Jesus after he died. You see, your explanation makes all the difference.

Let me try to make that vivid. When I was 10, I threw a softball through a plate glass window. Adults surveyed the shattered glass and asked, "What happened?" Now, the explanation—which in that situation was not very redeeming of me—made all the difference in what that broken window meant. What it meant was that I was in trouble.

In our day, there are quite a number of explanations of what really happened with the resurrection of Jesus. For example, there are people who explain the whole drama of Easter as an invention of the early Christian movement designed to make the story of Jesus have a happier or energizing ending. In other words, Jesus died tragically and that was that. Big disappointment. Then a bunch of crafty church leaders thought, "Hey, we can fix this." We'll just tell these people that Jesus came back alive. We'll write it up and add it to the end of the gospel stories. This is an explanation of how we got Easter.

¹Douglas DeCelle preached this sermon on Easter Day, April 12, 2009 at the First Presbyterian Church in LaGrange, Georgia.

Easter, according to this explanation was concocted as a motivator to get a despondent Christian movement going.

Basically, if this explanation is true, we are a sad bunch. Here we are still getting dressed up and packing into churches in order to celebrate the resurrection, which someone invented out of thin air 2000 years ago. That's the power of explanation.

Happily, that explanation isn't very plausible. To begin with, I know of no conspiracy or lie that has really succeeded at motivating a movement. Could the church really have been thoroughly dispirited after Jesus' death and then 20 years or so later—after everyone had gone back to living their normal lives—someone pops up with the story that Jesus has come back from the grave. Is it plausible that that story really works magnificently to get the Christian movement in gear? I can't see it!

There's another factor that I'm learning about which further convinces me that Jesus really did rise and return to his stunned followers. That factor is the evident antiquity—earliness—of the Bible's resurrection stories found at the end of each of the four gospels. These texts don't look like doctored stories. Wouldn't you think that late, concocted, pasted on endings about a resurrection would have been made up

in such a way that they would at least agree in all the details? The resurrection narratives are actually quite different in details and wonderfully consistent on the main point—that the tomb was empty and that Jesus appeared to people.

Think! A traffic accident investigator interviews four witnesses to an accident. One says, "cloudy day." The others say, "sunny." Some say, "lots of traffic." Others say, "No other cars." And all agree that the red car struck the blue car which was not moving. Isn't the variation what really happens. In fact, if the stories were word-for-word identical, wouldn't you suspect that the witnesses had secretly gotten together to get their stories to agree?

The resurrection stories in the Bible display an exquisite absence of effort to be airtight, which makes the idea that they were made up seem preposterous. Why, for example, would a concocted story have as the primary witnesses, women? In those days, people believed that women were not suitable witnesses. If you're going to concoct the resurrection itself, wouldn't you at least be sure to write in the most credible witnesses to verify your story?

So, what am I saying? I'm saying that the explanation that Easter is based on an afterthought and a later made-up ending to Jesus' life is not persuasive. The resurrection narratives

don't have the polished look of writings designed to make us believe something. They bypass several opportunities to round the rough edges, to make everything consistent, and pull in authorities. Instead they look to me like extremely early reports by a church not fully understanding what was unfolding in its midst.

Let me move on to suggest another common explanation of what we celebrate today that, if we believe it, kind of explains Easter away. I'm thinking of the explanation that says the disciples were basically confused or just plain incorrect about their experience. Maybe they went to the wrong grave and in their excitement got a story started that took on a life of its own. Maybe the one they saw alive wasn't really Jesus but someone who looked like Jesus. Maybe the grave was robbed of Jesus' corpse.

Now, what do we do with such explanations? Well, for one, most of them aren't very compelling. Have you ever mistaken one person for another? Of course, we all have. But how long does it take to get the misidentification straightened out? Seconds. Haven't you said: "Oh, I'm sorry. I thought for a second that you were someone else. You look exactly like my cousin."

Let me point your attention to an often overlooked fact about the resurrection of Jesus that makes it highly improbably

that the disciples made a huge stupid mistake. Not only did the disciples see Jesus alive, but they also discovered his grave to be empty. Keeping both factors in mind makes it highly unlikely that a mistake explains Easter.

Take a compelling explanation. People often claim that they encounter a loved one shortly after a death. This must be true because several grieving people have told me it's true. Someone says, "My husband visits me. I know he's okay."

Some people explain that the disciples were having a similar experience with a spiritual or emotional encounter with Jesus after he was dead. But what about the empty grave? Never have I heard a grieving person tell me that they felt in touch with a loved one and that the loved one's body was unaccounted for.

Let me summarize: there are lots of explanations out there that would render Easter not nearly so wonderful. What's neat is how the resurrection texts themselves have power to refute the skeptics and to leave us with a glorious new prospect.

Now, I've given some idea of a couple of explanations that are out there and are neither plausible, nor leave us with much excitement. So, how would I explain Easter? What really did happen?

I believe the most compelling explanation is that Jesus' return was just what the Bible says it was--a real physical one that the original disciples were completely unprepared for. Their first impulses were to not believe. But, when confronted by Jesus talking with them, and empty tomb, and all the others thoroughly excited and bewildered and relieved and energized, the most satisfactory explanation was that God had just done something utterly brilliant and unique. In short, this explanation is that the Bible has given us an accurate picture of what really happened.

Now, the thing about this explanation is that it necessitates that our world change just as it changed for the disciples. If Jesus has come back from the dead, a new phase of history has just been launched. We never have to worry about losing Jesus. He's with us always.

I heard recently that a famous painting was donated to a college. At first, it seemed the right thing to hang the artwork in the library. But the college trustees began to explore this particular painting. They learned that it was worth more than the college library. In fact, it was worth more than the college. At length, the trustees built a separate building just to house the painting.

Jesus' resurrection is like that. It is so great, it creates its own world. It happened, and then as time rolled on, the Christians began to understand the implications. If God brings back his son, that really means that the Evil, which crucified Jesus in the first place, has met its match. If God brought back his son, it means that God is not bound by the ordinary or needed to confine his work to the kinds of things that had happened before. If God brought his son back, it means that everything Jesus did and said leading up to his resurrection receives a huge divine stamp of approval. If God brought back his son, it means that eternal life is not just a dreamy hope. It means that resurrection has begun to be rolled out.

We live in a climate of skepticism, which would supply any number of "explanations," which would have the effect of collapsing Easter into a case of mistaken identity or wish fulfillment, or pious conspiracy, or hopeless naiveté. But if Easter happened as we have faith it did; if the Bibles' straight-forward explanation is the correct one, then everything really is made new. And we may be just beginning to grapple with Easter's wonderful implications.