

# Why I Believe in Christ's Resurrection

By Allan J. McNicol

Everyone is aware of the village atheist. Somewhere in our circle of acquaintances there was always one who did not espouse a conventional belief in the Christian Faith. But today it is different. More often than not, reservations about belief in God and in our personal survival after death emerge within the borders of cultural Christianity itself. The shelves of popular bookstores are awash with the works of writers and theologians who claim that if there is any miracle connected with the resurrection of Jesus it is that something happened to Jesus' disciples—not to Jesus' body itself. Of course, belief in Jesus' resurrection may not be denied outright. The language is still used. But by the *cagey* use of certain vague metaphors, what is really being said is that after Jesus' death the disciples, like Martin Luther King's "dream that lives on," continued Jesus' cause. After all, as people who have "come of age," we are supposed to assume that Jesus' body was not transformed. It is taken for granted that it was either stolen from the tomb or buried in a common grave. Today the village atheist has many allies.

## The Shocking Surprise of the Resurrection

The account of "doubting" Thomas in the Gospel of John is instructive (John 20:24-29). This passage reminds us that even to an ancient person the idea was preposterous that someone could return to life in time and space after he had died. Then, as today, the normal reaction to such a claim was expressed by Thomas:

Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe (John 20:25).

A lifetime of reading scripture and listening to talk about resurrection has lulled many of us, especially in the church, into complacency. Our familiarity with the story has inoculated us against the shock and bewilderment expressed by the women when they first found the tomb empty.

This was something far more than spring life bursting out everywhere after winter. So extraordinary was the resurrection event that it could be seen as nothing less than the intrusion of a new creation. All of us are subject to death. Jesus, as our representative, also experienced death (2 Corinthians 5:14). But as the scholar N.T. Wright loves to say, "Jesus went through death and came out the other side." The consequence is enormous. Jesus' resurrection reverses the course of creation from descent into decay to the promise of life. All who give Jesus allegiance by identifying with his death and resurrection in baptism now live in a new creation. Given the scope of this belief, is it any wonder that the early Christians both identified themselves and were identified by others as those who wore the badge of a core belief? Their God is the One who raised Jesus from the dead (Romans 4:17).

## **Neither Reason Alone nor Only a Leap of Faith**

Although reason alone cannot prove the resurrection of Jesus, we do not hold to its reality today without reason. The universal proclamation of the earliest Christians that “Jesus is risen” was based on eyewitness testimony of the disciples who were with him during his ministry and others that they had seen him alive after his death (Acts 1:22, 2:32; 1 Corinthians 15:3-8). Whenever these people were asked what was the basis for their belief, they simply stated, “we are witnesses of these things,” (Acts 3:15, 5:30-32). In the context of a community formed on the basis of this testimony, insulated by the faith that the God of Israel is one who raises the dead, both reason and faith cohere together, like a vise, to solidify the fundamental conviction that Jesus is risen. Many today attempt to come at this question of Jesus’ resurrection based on sheer reason alone. But such an approach will never bring closure. While one may claim that through sheer reason the evidence of scripture demands a verdict that Jesus is risen, another, equally using reason, will claim that the burden of proof is too great for even the biblical testimony to be convincing.

But if modernity has taught us anything, it has reminded us that no one perceives reality in a totally neutral objective way. How we choose to view the biblical testimony determines what we ultimately see. The biblical testimony of belief in Jesus’ resurrection makes sense when we live daily in the context of a people who have faith in the living God of the Bible who keeps his promises. Faith bolsters reasonable evidence to produce the conviction that the tomb was empty and that on the third day Jesus was transformed bodily into a new reality. This new reality allows full recognition that through the living Lord of the church the God who raised Jesus from the dead will also dwell with us and give life to our mortal bodies (Romans 5:11). The resurrection of Jesus lies at the heart of biblical faith in the God who continues to make all things new (Revelation 21:5).

## **Jesus’ Resurrection and My Resurrection**

Recently at a funeral service the minister in a commendable move to console the many grandchildren of the deceased lady addressed them directly. “I want you to know that today Grandmother is not here. Oh, yes, her body is in that box in front of us. But Grandmother is not here. She is in a better place.” Although the statement coheres within the limits of Christian truth, it tends to move one’s mind in a direction that is not helpful. Even Christians sometimes over-spiritualize death. The minister evoked an image of the body as a mere vessel of the spirit, which floats away into the presence of God (heaven) at death.

At best, this is a caricature of the richness of Christian belief. The resurrection of Jesus’ body gives added dignity to our ordinary life in the body. The believer lives each day vibrantly in the conviction that he or she will participate in the fullness of life that comes to pass in a transformed body at the day of redemption. This will take place at the second appearance of Christ (1 Corinthians 15:51-54; 2 Corinthians 5:1). At present we sigh and groan because of our incompleteness (2 Corinthians 5:2-4; Romans 8:22-23). Yet, our ordinary lives have their share of blessings and joys. With the presence of the Spirit,

already we have a foretaste of the coming glory (Rom 8:23). Whether we pass away and go to be with the Lord (Philippians 1:21-23) or, more propitiously, are transformed at his coming, our goal is to be clothed in immortal bodily existence. Then we will enjoy full participation in God's blessing at the day of transformation (1 Corinthians 15:51-54). This hope dignifies our present bodies, which are not mere vessels to be discarded and tossed away when life does not pulse through them.

There have always been doubters. But believers fortify themselves with the hope that the blessings we realize in our bodily relationships in this life will not be lost forever. The intimations of eternity are not fleeting like the dew on an early spring morning. We believe that our God, whose property is immortality, through sheer love will not allow us to be separated from him (1 Tim 6:11-16; Rom 8:31).

This universe is not self-contained. In the creation God brought order out of chaos. He continues to inter-relate with his world. He raised his Son from the tomb and thus began making the world new through the work of the Spirit. God's work will culminate in the full transformation of all of his people into the same dimension as his Son. This is not wish fulfillment. It is just how God is! This is why I believe in the Resurrection of Christ.

**Biography:** **Allan J. McNicol** is a native of Australia. His graduate education was done at Abilene Christian University, Yale, and Vanderbilt. For the last thirty years he has lived in Austin, Texas, where he now serves as Professor of New Testament at Austin Graduate School of Theology.