

THE FACT OF FACTS

by Ray C. Stedman

This morning my memory went back twenty years or more to an Easter Sunday in Chicago. I was but a young man, living alone in a room at the YMCA. I got up before dawn to attend an Easter sunrise service at Soldiers' Field. As I was dressing in the darkness of that early morning my mind went back to the account of the resurrection of our Lord and the women who visited the tomb in the early hours. It suddenly occurred to me that if something could reverse the flow of time so that instead of moving forward we began moving backward day by day, each day taking us into the past, it would be possible to live again through all the events of recorded history. If this would go on through twenty centuries we would come at last to the day of our Lord's resurrection. It struck me that if anyone could live that long he could go back through time and actually be there at that dramatic event.

Something about thinking that way gripped me and I remember feeling for the first time something of the tremendous reality of this event. It really occurred! It actually happened! Those women did make their way to the tomb that morning, and they were amazed to find the stone rolled away, and with beating hearts and incredulous minds they went to tell the disciples. All the marvelous events of that wonderful, unforgettable day actually occurred! Immediately my mind took in the results of that to me, the meaning of it in my life at that moment, and there came flooding into my heart a great consciousness of the presence of a living Lord. I shall never forget that morning. I stood by my bed, weeping tears of joy as the thought flooded my heart that Jesus Christ was alive. It was a fact, an eternal fact.

Now that same fact is being challenged today in many circles. The challenge is not new: it is very old. It had come even in the 1st century. A modern teaching today says that we must demythologize Scripture in order to understand it. That is one of the theological fads that come and go in history. You know, theological fads are like fashions, like styles: hemlines go up and down, buttons come and go, neckties get wide then narrow, and shoe tips grow pointed then blunt. This is the constantly changing kaleidoscope of fashion. It is the same way with theological fads. One of the popular ones today is the demythologizing of Scripture. That jaw-breaking term identifies an attempt to find the truth behind myth, behind what many regard as Scripture's fictionalized, stylized accounts.

We are being told today that the early Christians really had the truth, but that the way they attempted to convey it to us was inaccurate. The miracles were not really facts but dramatic ways by which the early Christians tried to express truths and thus dramatize them so people would believe them. If you really want to understand what happened in the early days of Christian faith, you must take away the miraculous, the supernatural, and get down to the basic truth behind it all. Modern man, we are told, can no longer accept the myth of the New Testament; he needs to separate the kernel of truth from the husk of myth.

This is the widespread concept of our day. To many, the resurrection of Jesus Christ is a clear-cut example of the need for that kind of treatment. They tell us that the great truth of the resurrection is that Jesus is alive, that his spirit somehow transcended death. When he was crucified his spirit somehow survived that experience and he still is able to influence us today. Realizing this, they say, can be a great help in the 20th century. But to declare that he literally came from the grave in the same body in which he was put there -- that his body actually rose from the dead -- no, they say, that is myth, that is hyperbole, that is an exaggerated statement, an attempt to dramatize the great truth that Jesus somehow lives. The important thing, we are told, is the idea of Christ's survival of death. It is not important whether or not he actually rose; what is important is the Christian hope that in some way there is an existence beyond death.

Now, it would almost seem that the Apostle Paul anticipated this very thing when he wrote this fifteenth

chapter of First Corinthians. The idea was already abroad in the church at Corinth, that Christ was resurrected spiritually but not bodily. Certain men in the early church (Paul even names two of them in his letter to Timothy, Hymenaeus, and Alexander) were teaching that the resurrection was past, that Christians would somehow go on forever beyond death but not in a bodily form, that the new birth was really the resurrection. When Christ changed their lives, this was the resurrection spiritualized. Based on this teaching there were those in the church at Corinth who were actually saying, as men are saying today, that there really is no bodily resurrection, that there is really only a spiritual resurrection.

This fifteenth chapter was written to answer that claim. Its argument is based on one of the great fundamentals of the Christian faith, found throughout the entire Bible from beginning to end: Christianity is not a religion of ideas. Other great religions of the world are collections of concepts, thoughts of men, teachings, and ethics. Christianity is not that. Christian salvation rests solely and solidly upon certain great acts of God in history, upon certain recorded events. These substantiated events stubbornly resist being explained away, because they actually did occur. Therefore, only if they did occur is there any validity to the teachings that are based on these facts.

You find this throughout the Bible. If you are acquainted with this book at all, you know that every event it describes is grounded in history. It relates itself to events that occurred and that were recorded by men. What is the thing that everyone remembers about the Old Testament? Why, it is the Ten Commandments. Well, what is so significant about the Ten Commandments? It is the fact that God gave the Ten Commandments directly to Moses. That is the significant thing. It is the fact that God acted. Israel could never forget that Sinai was an historical event, that God in a moment of time had actually done something. They never could get away from that fact. That is why, later on, when the Psalmists tried to point out to Israel its problems and choices, they retrace for the nation its history, to remind the people of things God had done when he appeared among them, things he actually performed, and which they never could escape from.

You will find this throughout the Old Testament. The Flood came as a great event in which God acted to destroy evil and to preserve humanity. God called a man named Abraham to go out on an actual journey into an actual land; he live there and began a new family of nations, and his descendants are among us today. Moses, Joshua, David, Isaiah, Elijah, and Elisha -- all these were historical characters whose lives are unmistakable facts, and the facts are crucial.

In the New Testament it is the same thing. Here is the story of the birth of a boy and how that boy grew up in a little town in Galilee. The Gospels are the story of his life and the specially detailed record of the events of his death. No one can read the New Testament without seeing the disproportionate emphasis put upon the death of Christ. Then, following that, there is this great story of the resurrection, the fact of all facts, the bodily resurrection from the dead.

Now Paul says that this is a fact, in First Corinthians 15:20:

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. {1 Cor 15:20 RSV}

I stress those two words, "in fact." This is absolutely vital to Christian faith. Paul makes a particular point of it. Earlier in the chapter, he lists the witnesses who saw this event. He details how many there were and where their encounters with Christ occurred. There is simply no way for us to overstate the importance of this great claim that the bodily resurrection is no myth. If this were a myth -- if it were only a dream, the wild hope of the early Christians, a figment of somebody's imagination -- then the whole fabric of Christian faith tears apart. In other words, if you deny the bodily resurrection, you deny the heart of Christianity. That is the claim the Apostle Paul makes.

Now, I know that is strong language, but it is exactly what Paul argues. It is not enough to believe in the persistence of Jesus and the survival of the soul beyond death. That is not the heart of Christianity. Only when we accept the fact that Jesus Christ's body came from the tomb do we then have any basis for the hope that the Christian also shall be resurrected.

Let us look quickly at this chapter and note the points that Paul makes in support of this. There are so many today who interpret this to be simply an unfounded declaration, a beautiful statement that captures our imagination, but has no real grounding in fact. But notice his argument. In the first part of this chapter, Paul argues that there would be no Christian teaching and no Christian church if there had not been a bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ:

I would remind you, brethren, in what terms I preached to you the gospel, {1 Cor 15:1 RSV}

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. {1 Cor 15:3-5 RSV}

That is the gospel the early disciples preached:

- They did not go around talking about peace of heart, or moral standards.
- They did not go around discussing how to correct the problems of community living.
- They went about declaring that Jesus Christ was risen from the dead!

There would not be a church if they had not had that message. That is what made them come alive. The Christian hope dates from the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Remember that after the crucifixion the disciples were utterly shattered. Their faith was gone; they were dazed, disconsolate, hopeless; they were even returning to their old ways of life. But in three days all of this suddenly, dramatically reversed and something brought them back together and sent them out as flaming evangelists in the very city where he had been crucified, telling the good news that Jesus Christ was risen from the dead. That was the beginning of the Christian message, which has gone on for twenty centuries because of the actuality of that event.

Then, in Verse 14, the apostle adds another argument, a second point:

... if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain, and your faith is in vain. {1 Cor 15:14 RSV}

That is, if this event is not an historical fact, then Christianity has been a waste of time. It is an empty faith; it is in vain. Think of the indefatigable labors of this mighty apostle. He traveled incessantly about the Roman Empire. He endured great hardships. He lived day and night with danger and peril. He was stoned and left for dead. He was often in prison. He was beaten and flogged. He was shipwrecked three times. Yet he was never willing to quit. And there were the other apostles, the records of whom are not given to us as precisely as his. But they, also, went everywhere and endured great hardships, all of them laying down their lives at the last. Why? Because of a hoax, a fable, a whimsical yarn that someone started back in the beginning? This idea is monstrous, is it not? Who could believe it?

And what about the converts everywhere these disciples preached? Wherever these men preached this message in pagan societies -- oftentimes in the presence of those who were alive at the time these events occurred -- they established churches. Converts and churches were everywhere. Men and women were won over from fear and darkness, and from their pagan ignorance. They were brought out into light and into orderliness of mind, from dissolute, selfish, evil lives into morally pure, loving, and compassionate persons. What did all this? Was it a joke that got out of hand? Was it a psychological trick caused by the eloquent preaching of an utterly absurd tale? Christian faith is in vain if this is the case.

Look at Verse 15. Here is a third point the apostle makes:

We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. {1 Cor 15:15 RSV}

That is, if what is preached is not true, then of course the preachers are liars; they are false witnesses, they are

deliberate distorters. If what they say about the resurrection is untrue, then you cannot believe anything they say about anything else. Where I lived, on a ranch in Montana, we had a neighbor who had such a reputation as a liar that it was claimed he had to get someone else to call his hogs! If you do not tell the truth about the great events in life, how can you be believed about anything else?

Furthermore, if this is not true, then you are in trouble with the teaching of Jesus himself. The Gospel accounts tell us that he often predicted his own resurrection. The disciples would not believe it, but he had said to them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up again," {John 2:19b}. John said, "This he spake of the temple of his body," {John 2:21b KJV}. Jesus predicted that he would follow the pattern of Jonah. As Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the fish, so would the son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. He said over and over again that the Old Testament prophesied his resurrection. Now if you dispute this resurrection and challenge it, you challenge the authority of Christ himself. How can you believe him either?

Paul makes a fourth point, in Verse 17:

If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. {1 Cor 15:17 RSV}

This means if this literal bodily resurrection of Christ is not true, then we have no hope that anything else the gospel declares to us is true. For this resurrection is proof that his death on the cross has actually accomplished our deliverance from sin. Consider the crucifixion by itself:

On Good Friday we reenacted on the account of how our Lord was hung upon a tree. From that event alone, would anyone have assurance that God was satisfied and that the whole problem of one's sin was settled? No, you never would have any assurance; you could never be sure. The guarantee of the meaning of the crucifixion is the resurrection. When Peter stood up on the day of Pentecost he accused the Jews of putting to death the Son of God by the hands of lawless men. "But," he said, "let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made him both Lord and Christ, whom ye crucified," {cf, Acts 2:36 KJV}. When did God do that? Why, he revealed him as Lord and Christ in the resurrection. The resurrection, then, is God's proclamation, his announcement, that what had been accomplished on the cross was valid and that he was ready to back it up.

I paid a bill the other day, and I got a receipt for it. That receipt is my guarantee that the man to whom that bill was paid acknowledges the fact it is settled. The cross was the settling of the debt between man and God and the resurrection is God's receipt that the thing stands settled forever.

Look at Verse 18: Paul makes a fifth point here:

Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. {1 Cor 15:18 RSV}

If the resurrection story is untrue, then when you lay a loved one in the grave you have no hope that you will ever see him again. If this story is not an actual fact, then all hope of life beyond the grave crumbles. This week on the masthead of the Stanford Daily appeared a statement that read, "Another day on the treadmill to oblivion." That is the only outlook one can have if the resurrection of Jesus Christ is not true. If it is not true, then death is not conquered: it is still the implacable enemy against which no human power can avail. It means that we have no ground for optimism and rejoicing on a day like this when we gather to celebrate Christ's victory over death. If this is not true, then it means we live in a universe without a God, that we struggle on against sin without a Savior, and that we face the darkness of the grave without any hope.

A sixth point Paul makes is in Verse 19:

If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all men. most to be pitied. {1 Cor 15:19 RSV}

That is, if the resurrection is untrue, then Christianity is no better than any pagan philosophy. In fact, Christians are to be pitied for wasting their time in a foolish dream. Why spend time like this, in worship and

prayer? Why not be out on the golf course these Sunday mornings, enjoying the beauty of the day? Why invest fortunes in spreading the gospel to the uttermost parts of the earth, even denying ourselves luxuries and pleasures in order that it might be spread? Why not lie and cheat and indulge ourselves, like the rest of the world? Let's wheel and deal and bargain and steal; let's go on with life and get ahead at all costs. If Christ did not physically rise, why not forget the whole Christian business and get on with life, throw the Book away and forget it all? After all, Paul says, if this is not true there is nothing to be trusted about the whole thing. If it is a pack of lies, then we are pitiable fools if we follow it.

Then he makes his final point, in Verse 20:

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. {1 Cor 15:20 RSV}

"First fruits" means that if he rose, we too shall rise. Not only in spirit, but also in body and soul. When man fell, he fell as a unit. The whole creation has been afflicted by the fall of man -- the natural world as well as the inner world. But when Christ came to redeem, he redeemed the whole man -- body, soul, and spirit. That is the Christian hope, and that is the only reason for Easter. We gather here in order that we might remind ourselves that there is a hope beyond the grave, a hope that is spelled out in terms of Christ's resurrection, a hope not only that we shall somehow survive death but that we shall do so bodily. We shall live in a world where we are set free from the bondage that afflicts us here in this world. We shall, as whole men and women, serve God through faith in Jesus Christ -- body, soul, and spirit. That is the Christian hope.

The other day a pastor in this area was working late on a Saturday evening, reviewing his adult Sunday School lesson for the following morning, when his doorbell rang. There stood a young business executive, his face ashen, his whole being agitated. Without a word of introduction, he burst out, "Pastor! If the resurrection of Jesus Christ is true, then I must change my life from the ground up!" The pastor invited him in and they discussed together some of the implications of this tremendous fact. In a moment or two they bowed together and faced the risen Christ, and there, as in the Upper Room long ago in Jerusalem, Jesus stood and spoke peace to a troubled soul. That man went out to change his life from the ground up, because this is the kind of a change the resurrection demands. It puts us on a totally different basis of living. We no longer can go on living for ourselves; we must live our lives in relationship to God's word, God's plan, God's universe. That is what the resurrection calls us to.

- The resurrection changed Mary from a mourner into a messenger.
- It changed Thomas from a doubter into a believer.
- It changed Peter from a denier into a preacher.
- It changed Paul from a persecuter into a missionary.

The early Christians all preached Jesus and the resurrection wherever they went. There were some in that day who mocked and some procrastinated and some believed. But for those who believed, the Easter event became an Easter experience, a cleansing, life-changing, transforming experience. That is what God calls us to this Easter morning.

- Do you believe the resurrection?
- Do you believe that Jesus rose from the dead, bodily?

Then your life can never be the same. That puts a claim upon you that you can never shake off. That means he is indeed the One in whose hands is all power in heaven and earth, and he must be reckoned with. His offer to us is, if any man will receive him, will acknowledge him, will invite him into his life, he shall be born again. Christ says, "I will come in to him and sup with him, and he with me," {Rev 3:20b KJV}. This can be your experience.

Prayer

Our Father, thank you for this great hope, a hope that thrills our hearts, a hope that our lives will not slip into oblivion after a few years here, but that there is a great and mighty program

that lies beyond this to which we have entrance through our relationship with a living Lord, who walks and lives and works among men and women today. Grant that each one here may in simple, childlike faith accept this invitation to explore and experience the reality of a living Christ. We pray in his name, Amen.

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