

-TEN-

THE RESURRECTION

EARL PALMER

Earl Palmer served as senior pastor at University Presbyterian Church in Seattle for some seventeen years, as well as at churches in Berkeley and Manila. He is the author of some eighteen books.

© 2012 Earl Palmer

The death of Jesus is the most public event in holy history, unlike his birth, which was quiet, almost unnoticed. Christ's birth was hidden, with only a very small circle of visitors invited to be present as the historical witnesses; Luke and Matthew tell of two sets of witnesses: the middle-of-the-night shepherds and foreigners from outside of the borders of first-century Judea. These Magi and night-shift shepherds were there, not Herod or the preoccupied religious leaders of Jerusalem.

During the public ministry of Jesus, his fame had spread in both Galilee and Judea, but it crashed into catastrophe at the week like no other week. And when Friday came, it became a public Roman event, because death by crucifixion was by design totally public and secular. There was no restraint on that Friday in human history. God allowed the full terror of that public Friday to happen to his beloved Son. Three days later, on the day we call Easter, Christ's victory over death was made known in place and time and, like Christmas and Good Friday, the resurrection of Jesus is concrete, real, and factual. But like Christmas, Easter is quiet, restrained, almost private. One empty tomb is like every other empty tomb; if you have seen one, you have seen them all.

When we read the Gospel accounts we may be surprised by this restraint. Only a few people meet Jesus the risen Christ. None of the key civil, religious, or political leaders of Jerusalem are invited to witness the victory over death that is won by Jesus of Nazareth: not the house of King Herod, not the resident official of the Roman Empire, not the high priesthood's powerful Annas or his son-in-law Caiaphas, not the band of zealot insurrectionists, not the quirky and mystical Essenes at Qumran. The ones who do experience the victory are a small

band of disciples, and they will begin in that very city the movement of faith that continues to live and grow, even now twenty centuries later. They became fathers and mothers in faith for all who believe in the trustworthiness and goodness of God the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ. Their names became a part of the resurrection legacy too: Mary Magdalene, John, Peter, the other women at the tomb looking for the body of Jesus, Thomas, two men on the road to Emmaus, Mary the mother of Jesus, James his brother, and one who later met Jesus on the road to Damascus, Saul of Tarsus.

There is a major question that every believer and inquirer must answer one way or another. Will I trust the witness of these quite ordinary followers, especially since their number does not include prominent first-century authority figures? There are three ways to question the meaning and trustworthiness of what the Gospel records tell about the third day. The first looks directly at the New Testament texts and narratives themselves. Peter tells about the resurrection of Jesus plainly in his first sermon from Acts 2. In that sermon he says of Jesus that "it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him" (Acts 2:24). This means that the death of Jesus on Friday was real. Jesus in fact died on Good Friday, therefore there was no rescue strategy at that most dangerous hour on Friday itself. What is also clear is that there was not a supernatural, mystical intervention on Friday so that Jesus would only appear to die but, because of his spiritual greatness, the humiliation of Roman death could not finally happen to him. If either were the case, his victory would involve the denial of Jesus' real death. Jesus at Good Friday would not be allowed that extreme identification with the whole of humanity since 100 percent of us in fact do actually die; in these views the transcendence of Jesus Christ is never endangered by a Roman governor. We know that the gnostic teachers in the second century did argue for this kind of mystical triumph. This invincibility is necessary for their theory about the nature of Jesus. They needed this kind of victory because the gnostic Jesus is a phantom Jesus who only appears to be physically human. In reality, his is superhuman, mystically human—therefore he cannot really suffer the humiliation of death.

But this is not the New Testament witness. On Friday we watch the actual death of Jesus. At the cross our Lord takes onto himself the three foes of humanity. Jesus disarms the power of evil in the cruelty of a brutal empire and triumphs over cosmic evil too. Satan the accuser, who opposes the will of God, has battled the Son of God at the mountain of defeat and humiliation. It is Jesus who disarms that scorn; he allows the worst danger that Satan can inflict to happen to himself, and by doing so defeats Satan at Mt. Calvary. Our sins are there too, and at the cross Jesus absorbs into himself human weakness and human wrath. He does what we cannot do. He is the Lamb fulfilling the Day of Atonement so that in Jesus Christ, the power of our rebellion, confusion, and harmful acts are forgiven and healed. But there is another foe of the human story, and that is death itself. At the cross Jesus takes upon himself our death and all death as the final boundary. In that final taking of the three foes—the power of every form of evil, the cumulative crisis of human sinfulness, and the death that boundaries all living things—Jesus is the Lamb who was slain. It is not as in a story or in an imaginary way, but concretely, within the record of history, "under Pontius Pilate" (Apostles' Creed). This means that Jesus identifies with us across the whole way of our life

The Resurrection

narrative and the narrative of every life, so that we can sing John Newton's song, "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me."

I can sing it because it really happened on Friday. And then three days later, when no one expected anything more to happen, grace was stronger than ever before, and death could not hold Jesus Christ—the very Jesus with nail scars has conquered death. His victory, costly in the humiliation on Friday, is joyously validated on the morning of the first day of the next week. But two more questions remain: Can we trust the witnesses who affirm to us this new and radical event? And if the event happened, then what does it all mean for us today?

The first of these questions invites two modes of inquiry. The one is textual: what weight should be attributed to the New Testament records as we read the accounts there and then hear the songs of worship that tell of the resurrection through the ages. Secondly, we should also ask about the reliability and intellectual wholeness of the New Testament narrators themselves. Are they to be believed? Why should we trust them as witnesses?

First, the textual question asks if the narratives of Good Friday and Easter have textual integrity when taken together. Do they fit as parts of one whole document, or do they textually jar us so that Good Friday's account and Easter's account are not one fabric—but the second part is artificially attached to the first? If this is the case, then the straightforward rules of linguistic and textual criticism will point it up to the careful reader. We then could conclude that the joyous victory day narrative of Easter should be understood as a later attachment by the Christian church intended to cheer up believers and encourage more faith. But what do we find when we read the Gospel accounts? Textual studies of the four Gospels do not support such an interpretive model except for the one final section in Mark's Gospel (16:9–20).¹

What we have is a whole narrative in each Gospel written in the same form and word choice pattern as the rest of the Gospel that precedes the surprise of Easter. Therefore, as we read these texts we need to decide how much confidence we will invest in the four Gospel writers. Do we trust their witness? And then later as we read the New Testament letters we must also ask, do we trust the secondary narrative witness of Paul, James, Peter, the writer of Hebrews, Jude, and John the Gospel writer who also writes letters and the book of Revelation?

Therefore, this second mode of inquiry becomes very important to the determination of the validity of these witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. How do we decide whether to trust the tellers of the story? This question is not so different from what we face when it is required that we evaluate the trustworthiness of a living contemporary who has story to tell. We, as listeners, must weigh their words as they seek to persuade us with a narrative witness about an event or series of events that we did not ourselves physically see or observe. Our task is to find some measuring markers that will test for reliability. Some of these markers are factual accuracy markers. Are the streets actual streets? Are there other sources of record that attest to the essential factualness of the narrator's account? One of the key evaluative markers will be character tests of the integrity of the reporter. Is there a reason to question the intentions of the witness, or does his character and track record encourage us to trust his account?

¹ Linguistic evidence here causes some interpreters to see this as an attachment by a different writer than the earlier part of Mark's Gospel.

There are also nontechnical but highly valuable criteria for evaluation that ask implication questions of a narrative. Garry Wills, the Pulitzer-Prize-winning historian who wrote *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words that Remade America*, has also written about his journey to Christian faith in his short book *What Jesus Meant*. He is convinced of the New Testament historical record of the resurrection of Christ, mainly through this vital but nontechnical way of testing truthfulness. He is profoundly impressed and convinced by implications that the New Testament believers in Christ conclude from the fact of Christ's death and resurrection. They primarily are motivated to love and reach out in love beyond their own safe inner circles even in the face of persecution. He also notes that one remarkable psychological proof of the resurrection of Christ is how the early church showed no interest whatsoever in the burial place of Jesus. This is not what would be normal in ancient or political movements. Only later generations and the tourist industry will become fascinated by the location of the empty tomb.

The most persuasive of all proofs of the faithfulness of the resurrection narratives is that the ethical and concrete moral hopefulness of the early believers does not sound or feel like a lifestyle and ministry that has its source in deception, such as would be the case if the disciples had stolen the body of Jesus and then created a myth of victory to tell each other.

The New Testament therefore wins our respect in each criterion of evaluation. The careful attention to detail is clear and in each of the texts. The quality of character that shows up in the preaching and writings of the New Testament believers is convincing. There is a genuineness marker throughout.

The resurrection of the body of Jesus Christ has profound theological implication at two vital crossroads of faith. First, it establishes that Jesus Christ, the living Lord, is not a phantom king in the spiritual vapor, what Karl Barth describes as the "Cloud-cuckooland."

It is best not to apply the idea of invisibility to the Church; we are all inclined to slip away with that in the direction of a *civitas platonica* or some sort of Cloud-cuckooland, in which the Christians are united inwardly and invisibly, while the visible Church is devalued. In the Apostles' Creed it is not an invisible structure which is intended but a quite visible coming together, which originates with the twelve Apostles. The first congregation was a visible group, which caused a visible public uproar. If the Church has not this visibility, then it is not the Church.²

It is the actual Jesus who did fully identify with us in our humanity and who is the Lord we worship. As Jesus Christ is the One who won the real physical victory over death, so our lives as his disciples must be real and concrete too. C. S. Lewis portrays this actual concreteness as well as any writer I've read in his dramatic and even whimsical description of the full and complete and costly identification of Christ with us in his book *Miracles*:

In the Christian story God descends to re-ascend. He comes down; down from the heights of absolute being into time and space, down into humanity; down further still, if embryologists are right, to recapitulate in the womb ancient and

2 Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959), 142.

pre-human phases of life; down to the very roots and sea-bed of the Nature He has created. But He goes down to come up again and bring the whole ruined world up with Him. One has the picture of a strong man stooping lower and lower to get himself underneath some great, complicated burden. He must stoop in order to lift, he must almost disappear under the load before he incredibly straightens his back and marches off with the whole mass swaying on his shoulders. Or one may think of a diver, first reducing himself to nakedness, then glancing in mid-air, then gone with a splash, vanishing, rushing down through green and warm water into black and cold water, down through increasing pressure into the death-like region of ooze and slime and old decay; then up again, back to colour and light, his lungs almost bursting, till suddenly he breaks surface again, holding in his hand the dripping, precious thing that he went down to recover. He and it are both coloured now that they have come up into the light: down below, where it lay colourless in the dark, he lost his colour too.³

The second theological implication is at the crossroads of determination and understanding of our identity and meaning as human beings. The creed is clear in the three articles: (1) "I believe in God, creator of heaven and earth," (2) "I believe in Jesus Christ his only Son ... on the third day he rose again," and (3) "I believe in the Holy Spirit ... the resurrection of the body." We hear the very good news about our forgiveness and also our resurrection in the creed's third article. That resurrection affirmation is about us. The meaning and worth of our complicated, physical selfhood is settled by God in the death of Christ in our behalf and in his victory in our behalf. This is why Saint Paul looks beyond our historical existence and our death, about which we all know and even fear. But in Romans 8 Paul sees that the whole created order has been boundaried by death (100 percent of us die). But then Paul writes we are boundaried "in hope" (Rom 8:20,21). This remarkable text is about the fulfillment, not the destruction, of the whole of creation. That hope is itself within the marvelous final setting of Romans 8, in which Paul affirms that nothing can separate us from the decision God has made to love us, "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom 8:38,39 NRSV).

Resurrection and the fulfilled promise makes the grand difference in the way we see and read our own lives and the way we relate to the world around us right now.

This chapter on resurrection is within a larger volume that is dedicated to the memory of two friends of mine who lived faithful lives of hope and healing to our generation: Paul Brand and Ralph Winter, the one a missionary strategist for Jesus Christ and the other a healer of bodies and souls of men and women. Both men lived as believers and witnesses to the reality of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

3 C. S. Lewis, *Miracles* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 148.