



Surprised by Hope

Session 4

August 12, 2024

Opening Prayer:

Let us pray: Loving and Eternal God, you are the creator of all. You have granted us life and faith, offering each of us a glimpse into your glory. We rejoice in what is before us. Yet, we know your glory goes beyond our senses in this reality. We ask you to open our hearts and minds in reflection about what might be beyond. Help us to imagine, to wish, to hope, and to do this all without fear, but rather in wonder. We ask this through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

I. The Strange Story of Easter

- a. **Reflection: What do you think about the discrepancies in the Easter account?**
- b. The variations are not ‘reconcilable.’
- c. All indicate that something remarkable happened.
- d. Wright presents four ‘strange features’ shared by all four Evangelists:
 - i. Up to the crucifixion, there was much biblical chatter about “in fulfillment of the scriptures.’ But there is a remarkable silence in the Resurrection narratives about scriptural references (outside of a couple of small exceptions). Matthew omits any scriptural fulfillment passages, and John suggests that the disciples did not know the scriptural teachings that the Messiah would rise again – but did not allude to which ones
 - ii. The women were the principal witnesses. Women were considered unreliable as witnesses. Yet women were the first witnesses, as well as the first apostles.
 - iii. The portrait of Jesus was consistent. Daniel predicted an illumination. The Evangelists portray the risen Jesus as a human being – unremarkable in looks, but yet somehow transformed. This ‘body’ can walk through locked doors and disappear. Jewish tradition believes in a thin veil between our physical world and the eternal world. Perhaps Jesus could travel between them. The story of Thomas touching the risen Jesus, and Jesus dining indicates a physical presence.
 - iv. There is no confirmation of future Christian hope. Everywhere else in the New Testament, we hear how the resurrection of Jesus is spoken in connection of final hope – we will be raised again. This does not come up in the Easter narratives. Rather the interpretation at the time was: Jesus has risen; therefore, He is the Messiah, the world’s true Lord. God’s new creation has begun. We must act as heralds making the kingdom come on earth as in heaven!



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- e. From the Easter event, the stories were carried forward through Oral Tradition. It was not until 35-50 years later that they were written down. The Evangelists were inspired to write their narratives to affirm “something really happened to the crucified Jesus; God’s new age has broken into the present time, they were charged with a new commission, something that made them reaffirm the Jewish belief in resurrection, but introduce several distinctive but consistent modification within it.”

II. Easter and History

- a. Two fixed historical points:
 - i. Jesus’ tomb really was empty
 - ii. The disciples really did encounter him in ways that convinced them that he was not simply a ghost or hallucination.
- b. **Reflection: Have you ever struggled with either of these points? Has it ever occurred to you that the resurrection could not have happened the way it was reported?**
- c. Comments about these points:
 - i. It was well understood that people had strange experiences involving encounters with the dead. Interpreted to be part of the grieving process. They never referred to this as “Resurrection.”
 - ii. Jesus was buried according to Jewish customs:
 - 1. Wrap the body in linen and spices and placed on a shelf in a cave.
 - 2. When the flesh decomposed, the bones were stored in an ossuary to make room for the next person
 - 3. If Jesus had not been raised, his bones would have collected at a later time.
 - iii. Did someone steal the body? Grave robbery was common. Perhaps, but paired with sightings and encounters would seem ‘curious.’ Neither by themselves would be sufficiently convincing, but together they provide a coherent explanation for resurrection.
 - iv. Could the disciples have simply made the story up to convince themselves that the event was true? Highly unlikely. No one expected Jesus to be resurrected outside of the final resurrection of all on judgment day. It was not a concept that was embraced.
- d. Some common arguments denying the resurrection:
 - i. Jesus was drugged. Answer: Roman soldiers knew how to kill people. If their prisoner would have been discovered to not be dead, the Roman soldier would have been next.



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- ii. Women met someone else at the tomb – mistaking him for Jesus. Answer: This would have been discovered soon enough.
- iii. Jesus only appeared to those who believed in him. Answer: Thomas and Paul.
- iv. Accounts were biased. Answer: Yes. Everyone interprets history differently.
- e. Some common arguments for resurrected Jesus:
 - i. Jewish tombs were venerated and often became shrines. Jesus' was not among them.
 - ii. The Church's emphasis on the first day of the week as the significant day. Would not note it unless it was striking.
 - iii. The disciples were martyred for their faith. They were first-hand witnesses. If the event would have been a lie, why would they have endured martyrdom?
- f. **Reflection: There has been no scientific evidence (as understood in 2024) presented thus far. Are these arguments credible?**
- g. Wright admits that he has not proven the resurrection in terms of some neutral standpoint.
- h. Historical argument alone cannot force anyone to believe that Jesus was raised from the dead, but it is remarkably good at clearing away the undergrowth behind the skepticisms of various sorts have long been hiding.
- i. Different types of knowing:
 - i. Science studies the repeatable – History studies the unrepeatable.
 - ii. Science – combine 2 hydrogen and one oxygen element, you will always get water.
 - iii. The second Temple was destroyed in 70 C.E. No way to prove it through experimentation. It was an occurrence that was not normal.
 - iv. Where science meets history:
 - 1. Scientists know the repeatable process of what happens to a dead body. The evidence is so overwhelming that it is impossible to believe in a resurrection.
 - 2. But history is implying that a non-normal dead body event occurred outside of science.
 - v. Can science be applied to other areas of life:
 - 1. Can there be a scientific approach to listening to music, or watching a football game, or falling in love?



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2. Can a scientist believe that the sun could rise twice in one day, or that a moth can fly to the moon?
3. Can science determine if Schubert's music is beautiful?
- vi. Could the resurrection be classified as a 'spiritual' experience? No. Resurrection requires something physically dead to becoming alive again. Therefore the resurrection must impede on the physical world.
- vii. Wright writes, "Jesus of Nazareth ushers in not simply a new religious possibility not simply a new ethic or a new way of salvation, but a new creation."
 1. **Reflection: What does the idea of 'new creation' look like to you?**
 2. If a new creation is really on the loose, the historian would have no analogies for it, and the scientist would have no way to inspect it.
 3. Worldview influences our ideas.
 - a. 2024 is evidence-based. Shows us how the world is.
 - b. Skepticism cannot account for an empty tomb, how the disciples saw Jesus, and how their lives and worldviews were transformed.
 - c. Historical context is critical. Wright suggests that important decisions are not made by post-Enlightenment left-brain rationality alone. One cannot argue using pure human reason and personal observation.
 - d. Christianity appeals to history, and to history it must go. Jesus's resurrection, though it may in some senses burst the boundaries of history, but also remains within them.
 - e. The world can cope with a Jesus who is a wonder idea in the minds of the disciples.
 - f. The world cannot cope with a Jesus, who comes out of a tomb, and inaugurates God's new creation right in the middle of the old one.
- viii. People believe that faith lives are private, shutting itself off from history – especially if history challenges their worldview.
- ix. Many view history as a close chain of visible cause and effects – never open to anything new happening.
- x. Wright suggests that, in dialogue with the life of the community at believes the gospel and seeks its life to live out its truth. We need to set it within the reading of scriptures, by which their whole narrative lay out the worldview



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within which it makes sense. We need to think it through within a context of personal openness to the God of whom the Bible speaks – the creator of the world. They are ways of opening the windows of mind and heart to see what really, after all, might be possible in God’s world, the world not only of creation as it is but also of new creation.

- j. Wright brings us to the point where we are bound to say: there really was an empty tomb and there really were sightings of Jesus, the same and transformed.
 - k. **Reflection: Do you lean towards ‘history’ or ‘science’ in forming your faith?**
 - l. How do we explain that? History poses the question, and Christianity answers it.
 - m. Faith in Jesus risen from the dead transcends and includes all history and all science. It is not blind belief. It is a kind of faith, like all modes of knowledge is defined by the nature of its object, is faith in the creator God, the God who promised to put all things to rights at the last, the God who raised Jesus from the dead within history, leaving evidence that demands an explanation from the scientist as well as anybody else.
 - n. Paul tells us that for the Christian, it is not blind optimism, but a mode of knowing, a mode withing which new things are possible, options are not shut down, new creation can happen.
- III. **New Level of Epistemology (how we come to know things)**
- a. Peter is transformed into a new kind of faith, and Paul to a renewed hope.
 - b. Peter is called to a new kind of love.
 - c. It is love that believes in the resurrection.
 - d. The resurrection cannot be ‘known’ from within the old worlds of decay and denial, of tyrants and torture, of disobedience and death. The resurrection is not a highly peculiar event within the present world; it is the defining event of the new creation.
 - e. The epistemology of love, which is called into being as the necessary mode of knowing for those who will live in the new public world, the world launched at Easter, the world in which Jesus is Lord and Caesar is not.

IV. **Final questions, comments, observations, suggestions.**

Next session will discuss: Cosmic Future: Progress or Despair?

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HOPE



Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection,
and the Mission of the Church

N. T. WRIGHT

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Closing Prayer:

Let us pray: Loving and Eternal God: We praise You for Your love and goodness. You have created us in uniqueness and wonder. You granted us the power to imagine and dream of life with You hereafter. Help us to honor all perspectives, and offer us the wisdom to have faith in your providence. We give glory to You through Your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Note: The information above is taken, whether in part or in whole, from *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* by N.T. Wright.