

GS490

THE RESURRECTION.

An Easter Morning Sermon

AT THE

FREE CHRISTIAN CHURCH, CROYDON,
LONDON.

BY THE

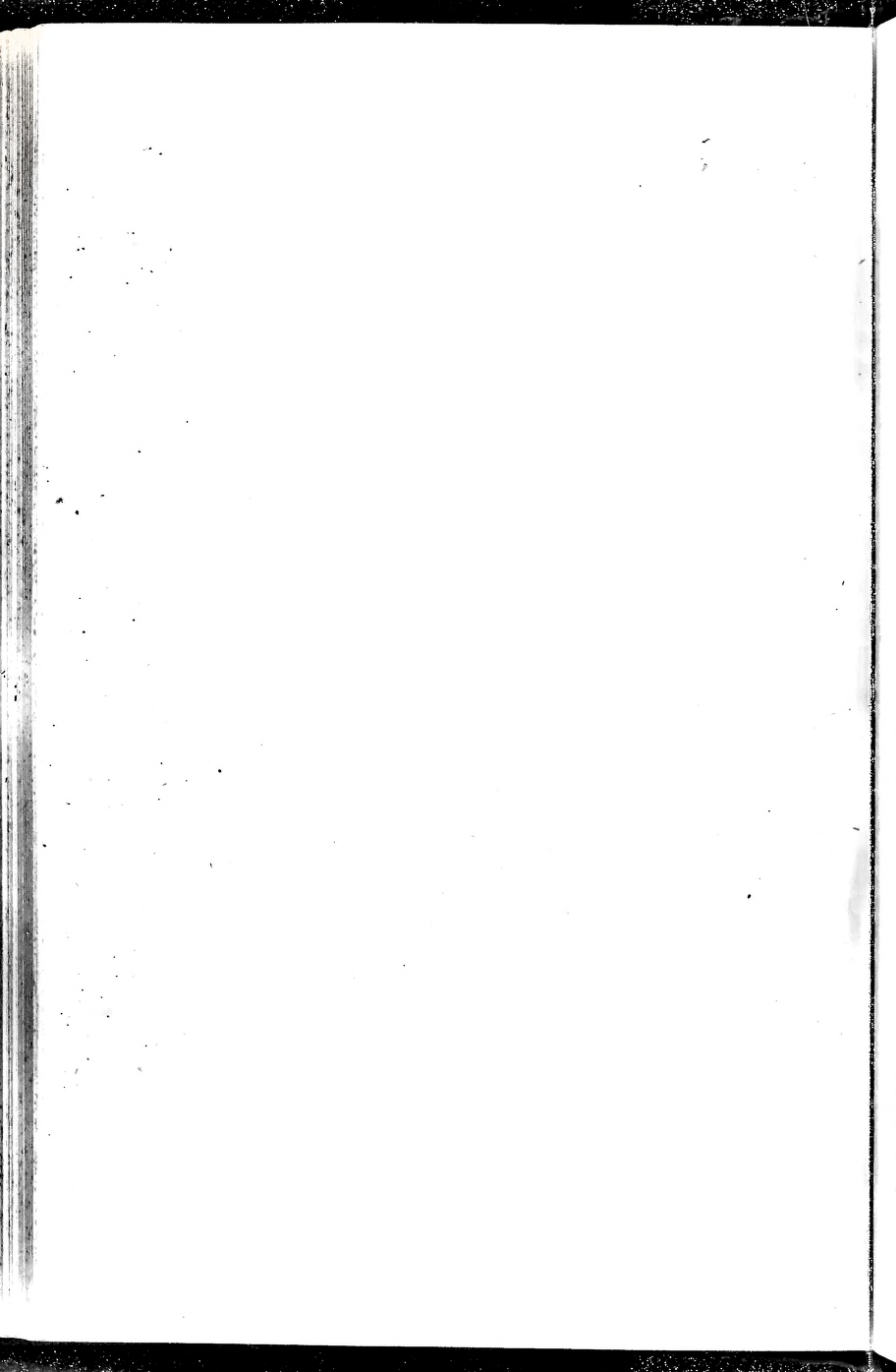
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THE RESURRECTION.

Did the Evangelists believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus?

Undoubtedly. But they did *not* connect it with the immortality of the soul or with the consciousness of the soul after death; for they attribute to Jesus the words to the dying thief, "This day thou shalt be with me in Paradise," *i.e.*, on Friday evening, on the day of my death; and no one supposes the body of the thief to have shared in the miraculous resurrection attributed to the body of Jesus. But as a miracle, undoubtedly the first disciples believed it.

Did the Evangelists attach special importance to that miracle?

Obviously not: their transparent sincerity, their entire truthfulness surpassed even their credulity.

We have every reason for concluding the existing Gospels to be compilations founded upon earlier records which have perished. Biographies of uncertain authorship, translated by unknown persons in a disputable period—biographies not asserting either authorship, or infallibility, or inspiration, handed down to us through many varying MSS., cannot be allowed to settle questions of fact, however precious they may justly be to us as the earliest records of the origin of Christianity. The very circumstances which exalt the truthful intentions of the authors, serve to weaken belief in the incidents recorded. The Evangelists agree in certain general statements, though differing in important de-

tails; they agree in recording that the body of Jesus was buried as soon as ever it had been taken down from the Cross; that the body was privately interred in a new grave erected in the secluded garden of a friend; that before the break of day the body had disappeared; that no one had witnessed the mode of its disappearance, or could testify to anything but the fact that, whereas the body had been laid in the cave serving as a tomb, after a few hours it had disappeared, nothing remaining excepting the winding sheets, folded and placed on one side; Jesus was seen *afterwards*, walking about the garden.

If the Disciples had anticipated the resurrection, and attached importance to it, they would have taken some means to secure knowledge of so interesting a prodigy, whereas *none* of his apostles see the body of Jesus buried, or appear at all at the tomb till it is empty.

Joseph of Arimathæa, Nicodemus, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of *Joses*, are alone cognisant of any of the details as to his burial—alone present; indeed, the gospel limits to the two women the beholding where the body of Jesus was laid. His mother does not appear—only one female relative and one female friend. But the gospel tells us that even they left the tomb; and from Friday evening until Sunday morning no disciple is described as approaching the grave. This was not the result of want of affection, but in consequence of the strictness of the Judaic law as to the Sabbath. The Paschal solemnities lasted through an octave. On Thursday this octave had commenced; and, according to the first three Evangelists, Jesus celebrated the Paschal supper with his disciples on Thursday evening, imitating the example of all households. The author of the fourth gospel contradicts their statements. He wrote many years after, when a complicated theology had commenced, and Jewish credulity wished to imagine that Jesus had died on the day of the sacrifice of the Paschal lamb:

therefore he drops entirely all allusion to the last supper, which has been called in later times the institution of the Eucharist. The beauty and spirituality of what is called John's Gospel must not make us forget that its lateness of date excuses its insuperable variations as to facts; and we must prefer the statement of three books to that of one.

Thus Jesus followed the national custom and celebrated the Paschal Supper on the usual evening with his friends, using wine, according to the Rabbinical practice; on Friday he was put to death—his burial was hastened because the Saturday being the Sabbath Day, the Jews, who had legally murdered Jesus, could not be guilty of the greater crime of touching a dead body on the Sabbath, and the Sabbath falling within the octave of the passover was a great Sabbath. His friends and relations dared not, therefore, offend the popular prejudice or violate the sabbatical law by walking on the Sabbath Day; and what would have been worse, walking to visit a grave. But at the earliest convenient hour after the close of the great Sabbath; three women according to one Evangelist, two according to another, Mary Magdalene alone according to another, went to visit the grave. The Evangelists again disagree as to the details, whether two angels or one appeared—whether the angelic vision was within the tomb or outside; whether the stone was rolled away in presence of the women, or found rolled away. But amidst these discrepancies, the narratives agree in showing that no one whatsoever saw, or professed to have seen, Jesus rise from the tomb.

If the disciples had anticipated the resurrection, they would naturally have watched night and day awaiting such a miracle; whereas the two women came expecting to find the corpse of Jesus, and brought sweet spices to anoint it, and their only anxiety was how, on their arrival, they should open the stone gate of the vault.

So little importance had the Apostles attached to certain figurative words attributed to Jesus, and supposed afterwards to have been prophetic of his resurrection—that when the women go and tell them that they met Jesus in the garden—that the tomb was empty—they accuse the women of telling idle tales.

Peter hastening to the tomb, and finding it empty, is at once satisfied. John follows and also sees the sepulchre empty, and “he saw and he believed,”—namely, he saw an empty grave and the winding sheet lying folded up there. They saw nothing else—they did not even see the angel or angels, but what they did see they believed. Afterwards they and others are described as having seen Jesus, and spoken and eaten with him. The Evangelist tells us distinctly what was the common opinion of the inhabitants up to the time he wrote, viz., that the statement of the soldiers was true, “the disciples came by night and stole away the body while we slept.”

Another rumour also existed, the origin of which we recognise in the surprise of Pilate when Joseph of Arimathæa asked for the body of Jesus; Pilate “marvelled if he were already dead,” and sent and asked the centurion whether he were really dead; whereupon the governor, on his sole and friendly testimony, permitted the Arimathæan to take the body. A rumour spread that Jesus had not quite died on the cross, but revived under the care of his mother, and lingered on for some days amongst her friends, and then sunk beneath his wounds and sufferings.

To meet that rumour, the author of the last Gospel states that a soldier wounded the side of Jesus with his lance, causing blood and water to flow, which the writer unscientifically supposes to afford certain proof of his death.

Generally when a criminal was crucified, the body was fastened with ropes to the cross and allowed to remain for weeks suspended till death ensued as the

result of starvation and exposure. The Evangelists tell us that an additional suffering was inflicted on Jesus in the piercing his hands. The mental and bodily torture thus endured by Jesus might be supposed likely to cause him at length to swoon away and become insensible; but hanging thus on the cross for a few hours would not in itself cause his death, although we know that sometimes men of fine organization and acute sensibility die under some sudden shock of pain, of fear, or of grief.

As time advanced, belief in the bodily resurrection of Jesus intensified, amongst Christians, though the event obtained no credence amongst Jews, Romans, or Greeks. But after all, the first witnesses can be alone taken as the establishers of the fact. Some will deem the evidence sufficient, and will feel a pleasure in considering that an exceptional portent happened to one so holy in his character, so exceptional in his influence.

I appreciate and respect such a feeling, but I do not share it. To my own mind, a strange portent needing, to be worth anything, a juridical proof, would rather confuse my mind, and cause me less to advert to the simple human grandeur of the moral and spiritual character of Jesus, as surrounded with myths it floats down to us amidst the traditions, the love, and the reverence of millions. If Jesus had not been what he was, his resurrection would not have made him any thing. There are many who believe that, as recorded in 2 Kings xiii., a man was raised from the grave—but no one reveres or loves him on that account.

We feel an interest in Lazarus because he and his sisters were loved by Jesus, but those who only believe in the moral resurrection of Lazarus, and think that rumour materialised that into a miracle, would gain no higher thought if they were induced to believe the portent.

The Evangelist tells us that a great many persons

were raised from the dead at the time of the death of Jesus, and appeared to many in the streets of Jerusalem. Those persons have never obtained from any one either love or reverence, but only wonder what became of them, and why they said nothing about the death land they had left. The prodigies attributed to the death of Moses and of Elias, only excite wonder in the minds of those who believe them; and other people recognise the resemblance existing between the legendary mythology and hero worship of all nations and of all religions. Cultured and reverent minds do not despise or ridicule the portents which may seem merely legendary, so long as they are interwoven with great ideas, and represent in a material form some lofty thought, some sublime virtue, some external verity; they only direct attention to the fallacy of a legend when it is being perverted to mischief.

Has the resurrection of the body of Jesus any connection whatever with the doctrine of the immortality of the soul? None. Lazarus might have been miraculously restored to life, and then died and come to naught, and the same as to Jesus.

Moreover, when Jesus thought he was dying and said, "This day thou shalt be with me in paradise," he testified his belief in the existence of the soul separate from the earthly body. His coming from that future abode to take up his body again would prove nothing, especially as no word is attributed to him regarding that state which he is supposed to have left.

If it were necessary for the action of the soul of Jesus that he should resume his body, and if the same necessity lies upon us; Where are souls now? unconscious in the graves, or in non-consciousness where? and if Jesus thought *that*, how could he say "This day, &c." If *Paul* thought *that*, how could he say that he longed to depart that he might be with Jesus.

If the author of the Revelations thought that, how

could he describe the white robed band of saints in the spirit world.

Undoubtedly Paul attached great importance to the dogma of the bodily resurrection; and the unfortunate adoption of the 15th chapter of 1st Corinthians into the Church of England burial service has accustomed thoughtless people, *i.e.*, most people, to connect somehow the resurrection of the body with the immortality of the soul. So sadly has that error possessed minds, that we often meet with persons who have privately come to doubt the immortality of the soul, because they have doubted the resurrection of the body. Such persons will quote, almost hopelessly, the words of Paul, "If Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain." Your faith in what? In the immortality of the soul? No!—in the speedy approach of the glorified reign of the Messiah over the elect; *i.e.*, faith in an event then universally looked for by Christians, but which time has proved erroneous. Before that generation had passed away the world was to have been devastated with fire, the Messiah to have come on the clouds of heaven to gather and protect his chosen people; *i.e.*, those living awaiting him and practising righteousness, and those who had, to the surprise of the other Christians, died. The death of any of the disciples amazed and discouraged all; it seemed as if the Christian hope of speedy redemption was failing. The fears of the living were calmed by telling them that those who had recently died should be restored to life, (just as Jesus had been), and be numbered with the rest of the elect, sharing with them the reign and triumph of the Messiah. That hope enabled them to bear with patience the miseries and insults to which they were exposed.

The sublime spiritual teaching of Jesus had already got lowered, Judaised, carnalised, materialised. His simple-hearted disciples could not rise up to the

grandeur of his ideal. Their more sophisticated successors adopted all their half-errors, and perpetuated such by forming them into a theology, and gradually petrifying it into creeds and formularies. It was impossible for the Messiah and his saints to reign on the earth, and to restore an Israel enlarged and spiritualised, unless they possessed their bodies. The saints who had died without witnessing the accomplishment of the expectation which was to be realised ere that generation had passed away must be placed on an equality with the saints still in the flesh, and, recovering their bodies, be caught up in the air to meet the Lord at his second advent.

All that Pauline doctrine had nothing to do with Christianity; it was simply the Rabbinical fancy introduced and cultured for 150 years B.C. During that period had arisen these ideas as to a Messiah, as also the dogma of a bodily resurrection. Amidst those dogmas Jesus had been reared—probably amongst the ascetics of the Essenes; possibly he accepted them; more probably he spiritualised them. The more we advance in a critical study of the Gospels, the more are we enabled to feel out our way, and to apprehend what Jesus really said and really meant; and the further we advance in that reverent and cautious criticism, the more do we discover the grandeur of his ideal.

The solemnity of to-day has borrowed and has materialized that which was the very essence of his teaching—of a teaching so sublime, and yet so simple, we cannot surpass it, and yet it seems that every one ought to have thought it. Turn from Jewish legends about triumphant Messiahs—turn from Pauline and Roman and Anglican legends about resurrections of the flesh, and let us contemplate e'er we part that resurrection of the spirit which formed the essence of the teaching of Jesus. I speak not of the immortality of the soul—Jesus believed it but he did not expound it,

he added nothing to our knowledge or ideas concerning it ; *if* he spoke of Hell, it was only in words like those already used by Plato and by Rabbis ; if he spoke of Heaven, it was only in the language of Ecclesiasticus and Zoroaster, chastened by his love of humanity, but he had his speciality, he had his revelation—to Jesus the egotistic, self-seeking life was death—the earnest loving thought and action was, life, the passing from one to the other, resurrection. That was the essence of his teaching, “I am the Resurrection and the Life.” Receive my great idea, and pass upwards from the egotism of self, from the valley of the shadow of death, into the light and the beauty of life, into the sweet service of humanity. Arise from the grave of the past, and walk in the light of great ideas, let the dead past bury its dead, arise and live a life pure, noble, refined, and gentle. It is only such as those, who live for ever, borne upwards by the spirit of God. Thus the great Master, only lowered when they surround him with fables, stands in tears of charity by the grave of the heart corrupt stinking amidst the rottenness of the passions, and to the soul dead in egotism he says “Come forth,” receive the inspiration of a noble desire : in the name of God and of humanity arise and live. May that thought, may that word, be to you and to me, my brethren, a resurrection and a life—he who believeth that word can never die.