

THE LANGUAGE AND NATURE OF THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS CHRIST IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Samuel Oyinloye Abogunrin*

I. THE PROBLEM

The resurrection of Jesus Christ constitutes the center of the NT message. The cynosure of Christianity from its very beginnings is the fact that God raised Jesus from the dead. But what exactly happened on Easter morning? Can modern man believe in the gospel accounts of the resurrection of Jesus from the grave? Is the resurrection of Jesus an historical event? If so, is it an event in the actual sense of the word or a mere expression of early Christian faith in Jesus as a divine person?

About two generations ago R. Bultmann spoke of the "incredibility of a mythical resurrection of a corpse."¹ But throughout Christian history the resurrection of Jesus has remained one of the major pillars of the Church's doctrine. This subject in its various aspects has been of fundamental concern from the beginning and the point of examination by scholars over the centuries. One of the major problems has been the language of the resurrection. The NT and the Apostles' Creed unhesitatingly speak of Jesus' resurrection in terms of being raised bodily. The thorny question is closely related to the empty tomb and the nature of Jesus' resurrection. It is often questioned whether the resurrection from the grave is an accurate description of what took place at Easter. Of course the fact that some scholars question the validity of the resurrection language does not mean that they are questioning the validity of Jesus' victory over death, which is the Christian mystery that underlies the resurrection language. But on the other hand, those who are unable to distinguish between a religious truth and its formulation regard the questioning of the resurrection language as a loss of faith in Jesus' victory over death.²

Apart from the language and nature of the resurrection, there is the perennial problem of the gospel texts concerning this stupendous event. But the examination of the gospel texts is beyond the scope of this paper. Our major concern here is a critical review of the various objections to the resurrection of Jesus based on the language and nature of it, especially the question of the empty tomb. We want to see to what extent the language and NT description of the resurrection of Jesus are still justifiable.

*Samuel Abogunrin is lecturer in New Testament literature and theology at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria.

¹R. Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology," *Kerygma and Myth* (ed. H. W. Bartsch; tr. R. H. Fuller; London: SPCK, 1953), 1. 39.

²R. E. Brown, *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus* (London: Chapman, 1974) 69-71; F. Durrwell, *Resurrection: A Biblical Study* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1960); D. M. Stanley, *Christ's Resurrection in Pauline Soteriology* (Rome: Biblical Institute, 1961) 4-5.

II. EARLY CRITICISM

Apart from Matthew's record (28:11-15), which is confirmed by Justin Martyr (*Dialogues* 108), there were those who in Tertullian's days claimed that the body was stolen by the gardener lest his lettuce should come to harm (*De spectaculis* 30). Also J. Klausner, quoting from a Jewish source, says that the body was removed by the gardener and cast into a canal where the waters flowed over it.³ Holtzmann is also of the opinion that the body was removed from its resting place and buried somewhere else by the distinguished councillor who was unwilling that a man who died on the cross should lie in his family tomb.⁴

J. S. Kennard says that the empty tomb is not necessarily a later fiction and that it may derive from memories that in Paul's day the use of the empty tomb as an evidence of the resurrection was precluded. Moreover, when stripped of its supernaturalism the empty tomb may point rather to a removal of the body from the place where the women had seen it laid and its burial elsewhere. He refers to the contradiction between Luke and Mark as to when Jesus was buried. This he thinks possibly furnishes a clue to what really happened. According to Luke the women stood a distance off to watch where the body was laid (23:49). During the burial rites they still had to go home to prepare ointment and spices before the sabbath. If the home was Bethany, the disposal of the body could not be later than about four o'clock in the afternoon. In Mark 15:46 and Luke 23:53 Joseph of Arimathea took the body. But in Acts 13:29 Jesus' enemies took the body and laid him in a tomb. In John 19:38 Joseph took the body "away" but in Mark 15:46 he took the body "down."⁵

But any attempt to explain away the empty tomb or strip it of all supernaturalism is against the entire spirit of the NT. There appears to be no contradiction between Luke and Mark. While Mark says that the evening had come, Luke says that the sabbath was beginning, both of which mean that it was getting nearer to six o'clock, after which they could no longer engage in the burial rites.⁶ The statement that "the women stood at a distance and saw these things" is an apparent reference to all the scenes of the crucifixion and not burial. Luke 23:55, speaking about the burial, says, "The women. . . saw the tomb and how his body was laid." The women certainly drew nearer to watch the burial rites. Also Luke does not mention the place to which the women returned to prepare the spices and ointment. Could they not have returned to the house of Mary, John Mark's mother, to get these things ready for immediate use? And even if the preparation was in Bethany the statement does not imply that they returned to Jerusalem that day to complete the burial rites. The statement that follows "they returned and prepared spices and ointments" is: "On the sabbath they rested according to the commandment." In the light of Luke 24:1 it is apparent that they were not intending to return with the spices and ointment until after the sabbath. As regards Acts 13:29, Paul is only giving a summary of what happened by the use of the

³J. Klausner, *Jesus of Nazareth* (London: A. & C. Black, 1923) 48 ff.

⁴O. Holtzmann, *The Life of Jesus* (1904) 493 ff.

⁵J. S. Kennard, Jr., "The Burial of Jesus," *JBL* 74 (1955) 227-230.

⁶Of course Jewish tradition affirms that the sabbath law allowed those who died on the sabbath day to be buried on that day, and the full burial rites could follow the day after.

indefinite pronoun "they" for those who took part in the arrest, trial, crucifixion and burial. This cannot therefore be said to contradict the gospel records. Moreover the "away" of John 19:38 is referring to the request to take away the body of Jesus by Joseph and the "down" of Mark 15:46 is referring to the action of Joseph after Pilate had granted his request. Therefore no contradiction appears to exist here.

Celsus compared the Christian story of the resurrection to various myths of different nations. In his view the tragedy of the cross cannot be regarded as noble; neither can the story of the earthquake and darkness be convincing. While he was alive Jesus did not help himself, but after death he allegedly rose again and showed the marks of his punishment. But who saw this? A hysterical female and perhaps some others deluded by sorcery who either dreamed in a certain state of mind and through wishful thinking had a hallucination due to some mistaken notion or wanted to impress the others by telling fantastic tales and so by this cock-and-bull story to provide a chance for other beggars. To Celsus Christianity is only for the ignorant, the stupid, anyone uneducated, anyone who is a child, the foolish, the dishonorable, slaves and women.⁷

III. MODERN CRITICISM

Some modern critics take a position similar to that of Celsus. They regard the entire story of the gospels, including the resurrection, as a development of a system of theology that was anthropomorphized in the minds of the writers in response to some definite needs. Such a development was modelled on the pattern of myths of other similar religions already existing in the ancient world.⁸ Baldensperger says that it was in order to meet the Jewish polemics that the Christians recalled the old tradition stating that when the women came to embalm Jesus' body they found the tomb empty and recalling the brave act of Joseph who removed the body. According to him the two traditions soon fused in the minds of the faithful. Thus was formed the legend recorded in the gospels according to which the women and Joseph acted in common accord, whereas in reality they acted separately and without the other party knowing the intention of the other. He cited the Nazareth Inscription to back his argument: "Ordinance of Caesar. It is my pleasure that graves and tombs remain undisturbed in perpetuity for those who have made them for the cult of their ancestors or children or members of their house. If, however, any man has information that another has either demolished them or has in any other way extracted the buried, or has maliciously transferred them to other places in order to wrong them or has displaced the sealing or stones, against such a one I order that trial be instituted."⁹

By the style of the apology we can date it between 50 B. C. and A. D. 50. If "Caesar" refers to Augustus, the inscription must have originated somewhere in Samaria or the Decapolis. Galilee was under the rule of a client prince until the reign of Claudius. Many scholars see a connection between the inscription and the removal of Jesus' body because of the mention of Nazareth. But the connec-

⁷Origen, *Against Celsus*, 2.44-55.

⁸S. V. McCasland, "The Basis of the Resurrection Faith," *JBL* 50 (1931) 211-226.

⁹G. Baldensperger, *Le Tombeau Vide: La legende et l'histoire* (Paris: F. Alcan, 1953); Kennard, "Burial," 231-232; Commount, "Urescrit imperial sur la violation de Sepulture," *RHR* 163 (1930) 241 ff.

tion between this inscription and the empty tomb is very remote. The gospels reported that the resurrection took place in Jerusalem and not in Nazareth. The inscription only gives support to local customs as codified by the rabbis. The legislation purposely seems to be against those who disturb tombs in order to disrupt religious practices apparently connected with ancestral worship, and the story of the empty tomb has nothing to do with ancestral cult. Moreover, the story of Joseph's role and the empty tomb are certainly two distinct traditions in the gospels.

According to Buchler, the fourth gospel lends support to the idea of a twofold burial by implying that Joseph's sepulchre was not the one visited by the women. The place of Jesus' burial was chosen because it was close to Calvary and because it was the Jewish day of preparation. Joseph's own tomb must have been somewhere else. He says further that no Jew of Joseph's distinction would have chosen a location near the Roman place of execution for his family tomb. His piety would be inclined to locate his tomb on the slopes of the Kidron valley.¹⁰ Kennard also thinks that the fourth evangelist must have thought that Joseph was planning to remove the body after the sabbath. The removal of the body by Joseph therefore explains the empty tomb. But the fact that John gave additional reason for burying Jesus in a nearby tomb and the fact that he fails to mention that it was Joseph's tomb are not sufficient proofs to lend support to a twofold burial or that the tomb was not Joseph's. A man of liberal mind like Joseph, who could choose to differ from other Jewish leaders, would probably not mind to have his tomb in any location outside Jerusalem. Furthermore there is no strong evidence to support the idea that Calvary was the normal place of all Roman executions. Also, Mary Magdalene was at the tomb when it was still dark on Sunday morning. It is very unlikely that Joseph would remove the body under cover of darkness on Saturday night. Kennard affirmed the historicity of the attempt by the women to embalm the body of Jesus after the sabbath and Joseph's risking his life to appeal to Pilate to obtain the custody of the body. He also agrees that from the Roman side Matthew is correct when he talks about sealing and guarding the tomb. But Joseph paid the bribe to Pilate. Thus when the Jews spread abroad that the disciples had "stolen" the body, they spoke the truth.¹¹

It is true that in the East the practice of refusing burial to criminals was common. For example, Tobit risked his life in burying the Jews who were killed by Sennacherib (Tob 1:18-22). But under Roman rule the situation was quite different. According to the Sentences of Paulus the law stipulates that "the bodies of persons who have been punished should be given to whosoever requests them for the purpose of burial" (*Digest* 48:24; 3:34). Also Ulpian in chap. 9 of his *Duties of the Proconsul* says: "The bodies of those who are condemned to death should not be refused to their relatives and the divine. Augustus in the Tenth Book of his *Life* said that this rule had been observed. At present the bodies of the punished ones are only buried when this has been requested and permission granted, especially where persons have been convicted of high treason" (*Digest* 38:24). Moreover if any one has been deported to an island, his punishment continues to exist even after death, for it is not permitted for him to be taken elsewhere and buried

¹⁰A. Buchler, "L'Enternement des Criminels," *REJ* 46 (1930) 87 (cf. pp. 74-88).

¹¹Kennard, "Burial," 234-238.

without the consent of the emperor. In the light of the above it is difficult to see how Joseph's life was in danger for requesting Jesus' body for burial. Apparently there was no need for Joseph to bribe Pilate for that purpose. What Matthew says still appears to be the most reasonable thing.

Barclay is of the view that in spite of the discrepancies in the gospels, the empty tomb remains constant and unvarying. Surely there is no difficulty in holding that an event of such supreme wonder as the resurrection would tend to acquire still more wonder in its accompanying detail. In Matthew no one denied that the tomb was empty. It was only the explanations on how the tomb became empty that were different. If it is true that the disciples stole the body of Jesus and concealed and later disposed of it and then claimed that he had risen from the dead, it would mean that the Christian faith is founded on a deliberate lie. But within forty years of the cross the majority of the apostles had died as martyrs. While men might possibly die for a delusion, they cannot die for what they know to be a deliberate lie. Also, hallucinations on an individual basis could be possible, but not on a large scale.¹²

But Lake expresses the view that the disciples after the crucifixion went to Galilee, where they had an experience that made them believe that Jesus was still alive. On their return to Jerusalem they found the women telling the story of the empty tomb. The women's story strengthens the belief of the disciples that what they had seen was Jesus in his resurrection body. The disciples' story also strengthened the belief of the women that the tomb was actually empty. But Lake contended that they possibly went to the wrong tomb and that a young man directed them to the right one, saying: "He is not here; behold the place where they laid him." Codex Bezae has it thus: "Behold there his place." This terrifying experience and misunderstanding form the basis of the Markan story. On why no pre-gospel records cited the empty tomb, Lake says that Paul was not trying to convince the Corinthians that the Lord was risen, but that he had already convinced them. He concludes that the story of the empty tomb must be fought on doctrinal bases rather than historical-critical grounds.¹³

B. H. Streeter in his volume entitled *Foundations* says that the resurrection of Jesus from the tomb involves intolerable difficulties concerning the nature of the future life. According to him it was only the spirit of Jesus that survived and was able to convey to the disciples the certainty of his presence with them, possibly showing himself to them in some sort of supernatural body or some psychological experience similar to that of the mysterious means of communication between persons known as telepathy, or possibly in some way no longer perceptible. The resurrection interpreted in this way is unique and miraculous and implies an intervention of God altogether beyond experience. This interpretation is nearer to our experience and more credible than the traditional belief that the body was raised and glorified. Nevertheless, he holds that the evidence of the empty tomb is historically convincing. The tomb was found empty not because the body had been raised but because it had been mysteriously removed by human hands. Similarly, Luce thinks that the modern mind cannot accept the idea of bodily resurrection for humanity. The future life is viewed as spiritual and not physical existence, in which personality and not physical organism survives. Therefore

¹²W. Barclay, *The Plain Man Looks at the Apostles' Creed* (London: Fontana, 1967) 140-149.

¹³K. Lake, *The Historical Evidence of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ* (New York: Putnam, 1907) 253 ff.

apart from the question of the miraculous, the story of the empty tomb seems unnecessary, inconsequent, even crude; it is an improper inference from the fact of the resurrection, he concludes.¹⁴

Reimarus is of the opinion that the whole affair was a clever ruse of the disciples after the death of Jesus in order that they might continue the easy life they had lived with Jesus.¹⁵ Another argument is that Jesus did not actually die on the cross. In John 19:33-34, when the soldiers came to kill the crucified victims in order to remove them from their crosses before the sabbath, they found that he was already dead. Secondly, one of the soldiers then pierced Jesus, and there came out water and blood from his side. But the physical fact is that with death all bleedings stop at once. For this reason some hold the view that Jesus did not really rise from the dead but was miraculously kept alive by the power of God in a series of mental and physical experiences that would certainly have normally and universally produced death. Others as well feel that Jesus only lost consciousness in a swoon and that when he was laid in the cool of the tomb he revived and somehow made his escape, and from this the whole resurrection story developed. Likewise Strauss refers to the Founder of Christianity as "a being who had been stolen half-dead from the sepulchre, who had crept about weak and ill, waiting for medical treatment, who required bandaging, strengthening and indulgence and who still at last yielded to his suffering."¹⁶

To Bultmann, the resurrection is not an event of past history with self-evident meaning. The cross is not an isolated event, as though it were the end of Jesus, which needed the resurrection subsequently to reverse it. Both the legends of the empty tomb and the appearances that insist on the physical reality of the risen body of Jesus are most certainly embellishments of the primitive tradition (Luke 24:39-43). He says further that Paul's list of the eyewitnesses was not to prove the fact of the resurrection but to prove that the preaching of the apostles was the preaching of the Risen Lord. The list therefore guarantees Paul's preaching and not the fact of the resurrection. The historical fact that involves the resurrection is utterly inconceivable, and the mythical event of the resurrection of a corpse is incredible. According to him the real difficulty is that the resurrection is an article of faith, and one cannot establish an article of faith because it is far more than the resurrection of a corpse; it is an eschatological event. The faith of Easter is simply faith in the word of preaching that confronts us as the word of God. If Easter Sunday is any sense historical like the event of the cross it is nothing else but the rise of faith in the Risen Lord, since it was faith that led to the apostolic preaching. All that historical criticism can establish is the fact that the first disciples came to belief in the resurrection. The historical problem is scarcely relevant to Christian belief in resurrection.¹⁷

Similarly, Marxsen regards as interpretation the statement that "God raised Jesus from the dead." This is because no one saw the actual resurrection, or at

¹⁴H. K. Luce, *St. Luke* (Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges; 3d ed.) 366; cf. B. H. Streeter, *The Primitive Church* (London: Macmillan, 1929) 50, 121.

¹⁵A. Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (tr. W. Montgomery; New York, 1962) 20 ff.

¹⁶McCasland, "Basis," 24 ff.; A. M. Ramsay, *The Resurrection of Jesus Christ* (London: Collins, 1967) 45-47; Schweitzer, *Quest*, 46, 53, 62; Barclay, *Plain*, 146, 155.

¹⁷Bultmann, "Mythology," 35-43.

least no one could claim to have done so. The statement is therefore an inference derived from personal faith. Even if Peter found faith because he saw Jesus, the talk about the resurrection of Jesus would still be reasoning from effect to the cause or an interpretation. In his opinion the reality in the early Church was the birth of personal faith, which is interpreted with the help of "Jesus is risen." Therefore the miracle is not the resurrection but the founding of faith.¹⁸

IV. THE NEW TESTAMENT'S POSITION

But none of the above theses can serve as an adequate explanation in place of what the Scriptures declare and what the Church believes about the resurrection. Most of the scholars referred to above started their investigations from the standpoint of presuppositions rather than with the spirit of detached impartial investigation. A sincere honest historian or the student of faith must not start with presuppositions if he is seeking for the truth and nothing but the truth. It is true that the facts of history must be interpreted in order to make it meaningful, but there would be little to interpret if the bases of the historical facts are destroyed just because they do not agree with our own reasoning. It is wrong to determine the reality of an event by what happens to mankind in general, and such cannot be used to determine the credibility of God's once-for-all unique act in Jesus Christ. Many modern Biblical scholars think that whatever is contrary to either ancient Greek or modern philosophical thought cannot be true, since they have the notion that the body has no place in the future life. Therefore the resurrection is interpreted with this preconceived idea in mind. Moreover it is thought that since the human race is destined for spiritual immortality through the survival of the soul after death, Christ's survival of death as a member of the human race cannot be different. By this the resurrection of Jesus loses its uniqueness and merely becomes an exemplary edifying symbol of our own future survival.

Certainly we cannot ignore the difficulties created by the gospel narratives, and neither can we discard presuppositions altogether. But we cannot use presuppositions as historical conclusions. Ramsay correctly remarks: "If the evidence is pointing us towards a resurrection of an utterly unique sort we will not be incredulous, for Christ himself is a unique and transcendent fact in history. If the evidence is pointing us towards a miracle we will not be troubled, for a miracle will mean not only a breach of laws that have been perceived in this world but a manifestation of the purpose of the Creator of a new world and the Redeemer of our own. And if the evidence is pointing us towards an act wherein spirit and body are strangely blended and exalted our minds will have no terrors; for the message of the New Testament is pervaded through and through by the belief that the spiritual and the material are interwoven in the person of the Word-made-flesh. Why is it judged incredible with you, if God should raise the dead?"¹⁹

It is true that the extant pre-gospel records do not speak specifically of the empty tomb, but the records and the gospels speak of a full tomb. The burial was specifically mentioned in Pauline primitive summary (1 Cor 15:4; Rom 6:4; cf. Acts 13:29). The empty tomb is implicit in the Pauline letters. It is inconceivable for an orthodox Jew to think of a bodiless resurrection. The problem as stated in 1 Cor 15:35 is as follows: "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they

¹⁸W. Marxsen, *The Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth* (London: SCM, 1970) 112, 113, 138-140.

¹⁹Ramsay, *Resurrection*, 56-57.

come?" In whatever manner the resurrection was proclaimed by the apostles, it must have included the empty tomb. Regarding the silence of Paul, Kee and Young warn that it is precarious to conclude that Paul knew nothing about the tradition. This is because 1 Corinthians 15 is designed to prove bodily resurrection. What is placed in the grave is raised, although in a transformed condition (15:43-44). There is no suggestion that Paul believed that only the spirit is raised. Paul's insistence on the identity of what is buried with what is raised suggests that he would have expected the tomb of Jesus to be empty. Perhaps in Paul's day there was no need to appeal to the empty tomb in order to prove the resurrection.²⁰

If the body of Jesus is still lying in the grave, then the resurrection appearances would be sheer hallucinations. The women who first saw the empty tomb simply thought that Jesus' body had been removed elsewhere. The early Christians did not just believe in the resurrection because they found the tomb empty but because they encountered the Risen Lord. The emphasis of the early preaching was not the fact that they found the empty tomb, but that they saw Jesus alive. Peter in his message on the day of Pentecost said that David the patriarch "both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us until this day," meaning that David's bones still lay within the grave. Thus by including the burial in the early proclamation, the apostles implied continuity between the body that was buried and the body that was raised, even though it was buried a natural body and raised a spiritual body. Bruce rightly states it thus: "It is morally and psychologically incredible that such men as the apostles and their associates could be deliberate deceivers. Men and women who are prepared to die for what they affirm are usually sincere in affirming it, even if they are sincerely mistaken. . . . But what gave rise to the 'resurrection faith' if it was not the 'resurrection fact'?"²¹

In spite of the differences in details, the gospels are unanimous in their witness to the empty tomb. Their differences in no way impugn the authority of this particular fact. Such differences are not uncommon in such genuine accounts of such a confused and confusing situation. The absence of uniformity or harmonization belies the theory of fabrication or agreed story. To conclude that the story of the empty tomb is a product of wishful thinking is to ignore the fact that it was the last thing the women or the disciples could have wished. When they found the tomb empty their sole desire was to recover the body. And even when they saw the Risen Lord, they mistook him for the gardener since they were not expecting such a miracle. Also the theory of unidentifiable or unidentified robbers who mysteriously vanished with the body does not solve the riddle of the empty tomb. So also is the hypothesis that states that the women went to a wrong tomb. The idea that Jesus swooned on the cross and subsequently came out of the tomb to wander around looking for medical care cannot command any serious support.

The fact that water and blood came from the pierced side of Jesus has received a great deal of expert medical attention, and opinions are still divided on the issue. Surely the Jews must have requested that care must be taken to ensure that the crucified were dead before the sabbath. Of course some early texts of

²⁰H. C. Kee and F. W. Young, *The Living World of the New Testament* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1973) 199.

²¹F. F. Bruce, *The Spreading Flame* (Paternoster, 1970) 63, 64.

Matthew insert this incident at the end of 27:49, suggesting that it took place when Jesus was still alive. According to Barrett, John is describing a real event and not merely a symbolic event because of the emphasis laid on the eyewitness. Moreover he says that the event described is physiologically possible. Blood might flow from a corpse if only a short time had elapsed since death, and fluid resembling water might issue from the region described as *pleura*.²² J. L. Cameron, in a paper entitled "How Our Lord Died" presented to the Third International Congress of Catholic Doctors in June 1947, said that the unexpected early death of Jesus is a clear indication that a fatal complication had suddenly developed. The insatiable thirst and the post-mortem treatment described in John 19:34 suggest an acute dilation of the stomach. The soldiers are sufficiently trained to know where to pierce in order to obtain a speedy fatal result to be doubly certain that the victim is dead. The wound below the left side of the chest would penetrate the heart, the lung and the upper abdomen to permit the blood from the greatly engorged veins together with water from the acutely dilated stomach to flow out in abundance.²³ Above all, the anti-docetic interest of John must be recognized here. For John the death of Jesus is quite real. The incarnate Son of God lived like and died like man in the fullest sense. The water and the blood in the theology of John also symbolize the salvation and the new spiritual life made possible by the sacrifice of Jesus.

In a reply to Bultmann, Schniewind points out that 1 Corinthians 15 does not really go beyond what Bultmann himself admitted to be important—that is, the witness of the original disciples to the resurrection. Men really saw the Risen Messiah after his death and burial. This was a privilege given to the apostles. To accept the words of the apostles and to believe in the Risen Jesus means one and the same thing (Rom 10:8-10). In their testimony, the Christ who rose again on the third day is one and the same as he who was hanged on the cross and laid in the grave. This bears witness to the uniqueness and finality of what God has done in Jesus of Nazareth.²⁴ Of course Bultmann does not eliminate the resurrection from the Christian faith but insists that it must be interpreted correctly. But his interpretation cannot adequately represent the meaning of the resurrection as found in the NT.

Fuller rightly states that the NT asserts that something over and above the Good Friday event happened in the experience of the first disciples, something more than their coming to a new assessment of the meaning of that event. Also the NT is quite clear on the fact that the tomb was empty on Sunday morning and that Jesus appeared to his disciples as one risen from the dead.²⁵

According to Ramsay the resurrection is a miracle because it is the unique, redemptive, creative intervention of God. Also it interrupts the hitherto normal workings of historical cause and effect and the hitherto normal workings of the order of human sinfulness and ushers in a new stage in the cosmic process. A miracle may be called an event brought by God which does not fit into observable laws

²²C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John* (London: SPCK, 1965) 462.

²³R. V. G. Tasker, *The Gospel According to St. John* (London: Tyndale, 1964) 212-213.

²⁴J. Schniewind, "A Reply to Bultmann," in Bartsch, ed., *Kerygma*, 72-73.

²⁵E. H. Fuller, *The Formation of the Resurrection Narratives* (London: Macmillan, 1971) 2.

of nature. On the one hand it resembles the way man uses his free will to disturb the disposition of nature, and on the other hand it illustrates the operations of the grace of God in human lives. If we recognize the potentialities of man to use his free will to distort the divine design, we must not deny God his own freedom in his work as Redeemer. If the resurrection breaks what appears to be law, it does so in order to vindicate another higher aspect of law. A miracle is a revelation, unveiling a new order of being and a new level of glorified human life. Though the resurrection is a miracle in relation to the natural laws of nature, in relation to the new order it is natural, inevitable and lawful. It reveals the goals of human existence when man shall be completely freed from the law of sin and death.²⁶

V. CONCLUSION

Of course if Christian faith is rational, it cannot escape philosophical questions. If Christian faith is rooted in history, it should abide critical probing, and the evidence as well must be convincing. While the existence of the Church, the gospels and the Lord's day may be inadequate proofs of the resurrection, the continual existence of the Church cannot be explained simply on the basis of the presence of the Risen Lord and his resurrection power. Every attempt that tries to relegate the resurrection to some suprahistorical sphere in order to escape the risk resulting from attachment to history has proved unsatisfactory. The appeal for faith and commitment cannot ultimately be separated from historical investigations, so that one can be brought to the borders of faith when confronted with strange realities that transcend self-understanding.²⁷

Nevertheless we cannot treat the resurrection as a nature miracle made wondrously impressive to appeal to the superstitious side of modern man. The resurrection is not just a miraculous happening in the dead past but an ever-abiding reality. Just as the resurrection cannot be interpreted to mean the survival of a corpse, it cannot be an unidentifiable happening in some supernatural realm of metahistory completely removed from the world of time and space. The resurrection cannot be a mythological symbol of the divine meaning of the death of Jesus as it affects man's existence. Certainly the evangelists were men of faith, but they wrote about the resurrection because they knew that Christ rose from the dead. If it were not so, there would be no testimony to bear, no story to tell and no gospel to proclaim. The resurrection placed its indelible mark on the story of each of the evangelists from the beginning. According to the gospels, the apostles did not come to understand or believe everything from the beginning. It was only as they lived with the earthly Jesus, listened to his teaching, wondered at his authority, questioned his identity, fled from the cross, and saw their hope quietly buried in the grave before the new act of God transformed their hope and they saw the empty tomb and the Risen Jesus, that they now came to know him as the Risen Exalted Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore faith in the Risen Lord is not faith in a supernatural figure from the world beyond history.

The main theme of the apostolic message is not that Jesus survived spiritually but that he was raised physically. The entire NT shows that Jesus truly underwent the facts of death in all its bitterness. His soul was exceedingly sorrowful

²⁶Ramsay, *Resurrection*, 34-35.

²⁷M. Clark, *Interpreting the Resurrection* (London: SCM, 1967) 102-103.

unto death. His death was real and complete. He made himself one with mankind by tasting death. The apostolic kerygma also stresses the act of God in raising Jesus from the dead. But the heart of the NT message is that Jesus is alive forever. The resurrection of Jesus is not a mere illustration of human immortality or that every good man will survive death. But it speaks of a unique victory by which mankind may share in Christ's resurrection. The empty tomb is certainly by implication part of the early kerygma. Apparently the resurrection story never existed without it. Since all attempts to separate it from the resurrection story or to spiritualize the event of the resurrection have proved unconvincing, we cannot but accept it as an essential part of the resurrection tradition. The theories that try to explain away the empty tomb are inadequate and too simple to account for the fervent devotion of the disciples and for the origin of the living Church. The denial of the empty tomb cannot depose the evidence on which resurrection faith is based. Such hypotheses betray the testimony of the apostles themselves.