



I Question Easter

BRUCE FINDLOW



A Unitarian Opinion

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I Question Easter

WHEN a Unitarian questions Easter there are some rules he must observe simply because he is a Unitarian—because he has accepted the principles which rule in a Unitarian's spiritual life. On the negative side, he must not assume that statements in the Bible are true simply because they are in the Bible. He must not give the Bible unconditioned authority in his spiritual life. Again, he must not begin his examination with the assumption that the creeds and doctrines of the church are bound to be true because they are old or because many people seem to believe them. Again, he must not allow a reverent spirit to make him give less regard to truth in examining Easter than he would if that reverent spirit were absent. And once more, he must not forget that Christianity is not the only religion of man, that there are others, each great in its own way, and that therefore Christian explanations of man and God are not the only explanations and not likely to be the final explanations.

On the positive side, he must question Easter with care and reverence, for its themes are profound and important for human life. He must examine as widely and deeply as he can, trust his own reason and conscience in his task, and try not to reach conclusions which are those he desires. He must have courage in the face of unquestioned majority opinions around him, he must avoid making final dogmas of his own conclusions no matter how carefully reached, and if he rejects beliefs dear to others he must do it with care, offending no more than is necessary.

It is with these rules in mind that I have attempted this examination of Easter, and arrived at the four conclusions discussed in the sections which

follow. Taken together, they represent a substantial reformation of the traditional Christian view of Easter. They are, first, that man is not a sinner and therefore does not need a divine saviour; second, that Jesus is not uniquely divine and therefore is more significant for us as a man; third, that Jesus was killed simply because people wanted him to die; and fourth, that the resurrection accounts arose because puzzled Christians needed a resurrection experience after Jesus died.

I

Why man is not a sinner and therefore does not need a divine saviour



ROGER HAZELTON in an article on Salvation in *A Handbook of Christian Theology* gives a useful summary of the traditional Christian view of sin and salvation and the central place it holds in Christian thought. He writes (p 339, Fontana Books 1960): 'Salvation has decisive importance in the vocabulary of theology because it points to an experience that is utterly central to faith itself. This experience may be characterised briefly as the gracious act of God whereby man is delivered from his sinful selfhood into newness and fullness of life. That is, salvation is something done in and for man by the will and work of God. To the Christian, this takes place 'through Jesus Christ our Lord' since in Him God takes our conditions upon Himself, moves to bridge the gap which our own sin has caused, and empowers us to become what He intends us to be.'

That is a fairly plain Christian statement without most of the technical terms such as atonement, redemption, 'the Fall' and so on. If it makes little or no sense to you that is some indication of the irrelevance of the Christian theology of Easter. If, on the other hand, it makes sense to you (as it does to me) but your inclination is to reject it as an untrue picture of yourself, either yourself alone or yourself related to God, then we have to see what grounds we have for rejecting it. It speaks of 'man's sinful selfhood' and 'God's gracious act'. The more tangible of these is 'man's sinful selfhood', so let us begin there and see where we are led.

How do you feel about yourself? Do you feel some unworthiness, that there is some standard of perfection from which you have fallen short, or some

standard to which you think you ought to rise? Do you feel selfish—literally speaking—that *you* are the centre of things, that all that happens around you has to be related to yourself? The answers do not matter all that much at the moment. But in the fact that we can ask such questions about ourselves there is, we are told, the possibility of sinfulness. ‘The essence of sin’, says Canon OC Quick (*Doctrines of the Creeds*, pp 206-7), ‘is much more closely connected with the new emergence of human self-consciousness than with any survival of animal instincts in man . . . It is in the conscious self-reference of all man’s thought and action, rather than in the animal basis of his appetite, that the occasion of sin and selfishness resides.’ Our emergence into self-consciousness, it has been well said, may very well be described as a rise rather than a fall. ‘It marks a new and necessary stage in the growth of consciousness. Out of it have arisen all the distinctive achievements and possibilities of human life. But along with the good which the emergence of self-consciousness has brought there has come into life an immensity of evil.’ (*A Free Religious Faith*, p 178.)

This brings us to the crux of the matter, the crux out of which all ideas of our sinfulness stem—the fact that our self-conscious being produces evil as well as good. We do not need to go into the question of whether evil in the world stems more from social conditions than from human thoughts and deeds. We can accept the fact that for every one of us sometimes the fruits of our thoughts and deeds are good and sometimes they are bad. We know the difference. We have some way of measuring good against bad, or bad against good. If we try to measure our good and

evil in terms of either quantity or quality we may conclude that there is more evil in ourselves than good. We may decide that we are sinners. But Phillip Hewett reminds us (in *An Unfettered Faith*, p 94) that ‘Man should not be called a sinner unless sinfulness were the most distinctive characteristic of the great majority of men; in other words, unless man’s nature is primarily evil, so that on the whole the world is worse off rather than better off for having him in it’.

But I want to abandon the words ‘sinner’ and ‘saviour’, because they are irrelevant, meaningless words to many today, and because they are misleading words to others. The picture they give is of human creatures who have ‘missed the mark’, fallen short of divine expectations, disobeyed God’s will or law, fallen creatures who cannot lift themselves up to the high place they are meant to occupy; creatures alienated, cut off, from God, who cannot, by their own efforts alone, swim or struggle or fly back to God from whom they have become separated. It is my contention that to speak in this way is to deny what we now know of ourselves and of people in general. It is to clamp a pre-fabricated theological framework (with a host of presuppositions) over a real situation which was never meant to fit such a framework.

What we see in human life (and life around human life) is not ‘missing the mark’, not falling short, not being cut off. What we see is evolution, growth, development, becoming—though not a smooth, errorless, unimpeded, perfectly-aimed becoming. There are many false moves, many failures, some slipping back, but all this is contained in a process of becoming such that we may say of man, of ourselves, that we are imperfect, our lives are

productive of evil as well as good, not because we have slipped or fallen or been cut off from some original perfection, but because we are growing, developing, becoming, as part of the very movement of life. We are, you might say, being carried along in the none-too-smooth stream of evolving life, and meeting many vicissitudes.

But our lives are not wholly 'determined' as that rough simile seems to suggest. This we know about ourselves—that we can make, must make, choices between good and evil, right and wrong, the selfish and the unselfish act; and we find that we do not always choose the good, the right, the unselfish. But neither do we always choose the evil, the wrong, the selfish. Therefore, rather than trying to decide whether our basic inclination is chiefly towards the good or the evil, so that we can label man either sinner or saint, let us recognise the very mixture of our decisions as being inherent in the process of becoming of which we are a part; not that each choice is determined, but that the fact that we will make different choices, sometimes good, sometimes bad, is determined by the kind of creatures we all are.

If you accept this view of man, you will not call him a sinner and you will not want to offer him a divine saviour. Traditional Christianity offers us Jesus hanging on a cross as the divine-human sacrifice for our sin, and the Church down the ages has adorned that abhorrent idea with a great many different explanations of its meaning. Atonement theories range all the way from 'There was no other good enough to pay the price of sin' to 'the moral influence of the sacrificial love displayed in the life and death of Jesus Christ'.

But we can drop the whole idea of salvation—the idea that we have to be saved from something, rescued from the darkness in our own human nature by a divine event. We have darkness in our nature as well as light, but we do not need, we are not helped by, dramatic offers of rescue. If we drop the whole idea of salvation we can also drop, thankfully I hope, the image of a bleeding saviour figure. You may think we have nothing left then, but this is not the case. We have left ourselves, our growing selves. We have left the idea or reality of God (for some an idea, for others a reality) as a light to guide us in a true and living way. If we are not sinners we do not need a saviour, but if we are living, growing, developing creatures we do need a guide. And we have left, not least, the man Jesus who died on a cross all those years ago. We have the man Jesus not as a saviour but as an example, a leader, a teacher, a man of God. If our heritage is Christian he can mean a great deal to us still.

*Why Jesus is not
uniquely divine,
and therefore means
more to us as a man*



THE belief that Jesus is, or was, uniquely divine is a much cherished Christian belief—though we may note at once that it has offended both Jews and Muslims for hundreds of years. By ‘uniquely divine’ I mean such traditional beliefs as ‘the only begotten Son of God’, ‘God the Son’, ‘Christ the Divine Word or Logos’, ‘*the* Son of God’, and every expression of the thought that Jesus Christ has somehow revealed God to man in some exclusive or final way.

It may not have occurred to you that there are so many ways of saying that Jesus is uniquely divine, but it is so. In fact, some of the difficulty involved in trying to discover who or what the historical Jesus of Nazareth was stems from the variety of names men have given to him—reflecting the variety of ideas they have had about him. Arthur Graham, in a poem (in *Parts and Proportions*) about Jesus, lists a number of the names—‘Lamb of God, Man of Sorrow, Son of David, man or God, man of Nazareth, carpenter’s son . . . Christ, Saviour, Great Friend of Man, Man of the Cross’. Once we begin to think about it, others come to mind also: ‘The Light of the World’, ‘The Messiah’, ‘The Man for Others’ . . . and so on.

In the first three Gospels (*Matt* 16: 13-16, *Mark* 8: 27-30, *Luke* 9: 18-21) there is an account of an incident of which Christians make much when they want to show the unique divinity of Jesus Christ. It is the occasion at Caesarea Philippi when Jesus asked his disciples: ‘Who do men say that I am?’ We are told that the disciples replied: ‘Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.’ Then, we are told, Jesus asked his disciples: ‘But who do you say that I am?’, and Peter replied: ‘You are the Christ, the

Son of the living God.’ That is Peter’s reply in Matthew’s account. In Mark’s it is simply ‘You are the Christ’, and in Luke it is ‘The Christ of God’. The words are all English translations of Greek titles which the fisherman Peter probably never uttered, and three reports give three versions.

That situation in the records leads me to offer another name for Jesus which may help us to see him without some of the theological and sentimental attachments of the centuries. Jesus is the Greek form of Joshua, and Christ is the Greek for ‘the Anointed One’, or Messiah in Hebrew. So let us think about Joshua the Messiah who lived and died a Jew about two thousand years ago. When he rode into Jerusalem on an ass, we are told that the people asked: ‘Who is this man?’, and others in the crowd replied: ‘This is the prophet Jesus (or Joshua) from Nazareth in Galilee.’ And, as we have seen, there is some confirmation of that—people said this man was John the Baptist or Jeremiah or one of the prophets. The general view in his own time was that Joshua was a prophet—a man of God, perhaps a particularly holy man of God, but still like others of the same kind.

Of course all this was a long time ago. We cannot rest much upon the opinions of the comparatively simple and superstitious people of those times. But Jesus himself apparently never claimed unique divinity for himself. He used many times the term ‘Son of Man’, which in his day had a number of religious meanings, including something like ‘messenger of God’, but he did not call himself ‘Son of God’. But all these points simply show the great uncertainty which surrounds the man. The belief

that Jesus was God, or the only son of God, or the final revealer of God, belongs not to his time or thought, but to later generations of those who became his followers. This belief is the fruit of faith and piety, not of evidence or fact, and indeed it is conditioned by social pressures of various kinds in the years during which the Christian religion spread and grew.

If I set forth plainly the arguments against the unique divinity of Christ as they appear to one Unitarian, they are these. First, Jesus did not think of himself as uniquely divine. One might add that he seems to have been too close to God to make that kind of mistake. Second, his first followers who lived with him for a few years did not regard him as uniquely divine while he lived. They were, by all accounts, fairly superstitious men in an unsettled religious environment, and the most they thought about Jesus when he lived was that he must be the Messiah, the agent of God whom some Jews expected in those days. After his death they became convinced of this and wove many stories about his memory as devoted and superstitious men would.

Third (and this is very clear), the general public of his own time did not see Jesus as uniquely divine. One in a line of prophets, yes; the likeliest hope for the rescue of the Jewish nation from Roman rule, yes; but God Almighty come down to earth—never for a moment did contemporary opinion think this about Joshua of Nazareth in Galilee. Fourth, Jesus was (and is) not uniquely divine because there have been other men like him before and since his time. In Hinduism, Judaism, Islam and Buddhism, as well as in Christianity, there can be found a number of

men who were great religious lights in the past, who, in some cases, founded great world religions which continue, and who still influence the lives of people today. Gotama who was called the Buddha was one, Mohammed was another, Francis of Assisi was another, Mahatma Gandhi was another. With those who are near to our own time it is hard to believe that there is a likeness with Joshua of Nazareth in Galilee, around whom the Christian faith of centuries has built vast edifices of glory. But if you look into it, you can read how men wove precisely the same kind of stories around Gotama and Francis as were woven around Jesus, and if you went into India today among simple people you would find them weaving thoughts of divinity around the human life and death of Gandhi. Men have often turned their heroes into gods—we need gods to worship and history shows how often we have made them out of great men, kings, warriors, emperors and saints, and how often those who have made such a god have come to believe that their god is unique or final.

Fifth, it is not reasonable to believe that Jesus of Nazareth was uniquely divine. This is not a popular argument—most people do not like reasonable religion—but it must be presented in the name of all those who have ever suffered from the religious bigotry or unreasonableness of others. Unique claims for Jesus deny the good lives of other good men, deny the value of great faiths built upon their lives and words. If we believe in a God who is One for men everywhere, it is unreasonable to believe that he can be found for sure only in the life of a carpenter's son in a remote province of a transient empire in a particular period of three years in the long, long

history of man and his world.

For these five reasons then I conclude (leaving much detail out of the argument) that Jesus was not uniquely divine. To many traditional Christians this must seem a disastrous conclusion, leaving nothing in which to believe; but the second part of the argument—that Jesus means more to us as a man *because* he is not uniquely divine—this second part is the Unitarian affirmation that in the man Jesus there is much for faith which is true to the mind and heart of man, and good for living in every generation.

Jesus means much to us as a man for four reasons which, summarily stated, are these. First, so far as we can discern it, he lived a quality of life worthy of our imitation. His life is an example for us in its quality, but not in its form. The distinction is important. Second, his teaching helps us to live truly, so far as we can understand it across so many centuries. Again there is a distinction to make: the teaching of Jesus *helps* us to live truly—it should not become our rule. Then, third,—and here the lack of a unique divinity is very important—Jesus shows us the possibilities of spiritual development which are open to all dedicated men. He was, by all accounts, a spiritual giant, close to God, rich in wisdom and compassion, endowed perhaps with special powers of insight and healing by virtue of his spiritual growth, the growth in that particular side of his nature. If he was God come down to earth, this has no relevance for us. But if he was a man as we are, then he shows us what might be in our life if, starting young, we choose to grow in the spiritual part of our nature rather than, say, to become prosperous, or popular, or skilled in some sport.

Then, fourth, and last, and following on, Jesus the man shows us the fruits of spiritual growth, the rewards of life given to God. How one lives such a life today may well be different in kind from the way Jesus lived his good life in a rural society two thousand years ago. But the fruits will be the same: love, joy, peace, courage—all that he showed when, as a young man, he set his face towards Jerusalem and accepted the suffering and death which he knew were waiting for him there. Here was a man who learned in about thirty years how to live and how to die. Jesus realised in his human life, as only a few do in each generation, the divine possibilities which exist for us all.

*Why people wanted
Jesus to die,
and therefore
had him killed*



TRADITIONAL CHRISTIANS who grieve for the death of Jesus on Good Friday rejoice on Easter Day for his return to life as a divine event, a miracle worked by God for the good of mankind. But we who look upon Jesus as a human figure and upon his death as a human event celebrate his *death*, because his death inspires and teaches us both how to live and, when we must, how to die. It is important that we should see clearly that the crucifixion was a human event, that is to say, an event brought about by men and not by God, not an event arranged by God either by being written into a plan for the universe when the world began or by some kind of miraculous intervention in the thoughts and deeds of men in Palestine nearly two thousand years ago. To see the death of Jesus as a *human* event means to recognise that it was a man who died, that he died because other human beings wanted him to die, he died because *people* organised and carried out his execution. People—representatives of religion, of government, of the general public—wanted Jesus to die and had him killed.

What is there to celebrate in that? you may ask. What is there to inspire and teach us in such sordid human behaviour? Well, let us see why people wanted Jesus to die and then the answers to these objections may appear. The question is not 'Why did God arrange his death?', or 'Why did God need a sacrificial victim?' or 'Why did men need a saviour?' The question is a human one: 'Why did his fellow human beings want the man Jesus to die? Why did they prefer him dead rather than alive?'

There are three kinds of reasons; two can be seen in the records of his trial and crucifixion, the

third kind can be inferred from our general knowledge of human behaviour. First, there seem to have been *religious* reasons. The leaders of the establishment, the main stream of religion, of the Jewish religion in his time and place, wanted to do away with Jesus because he was a danger to them and their orthodox and well-established faith. How could one man be as dangerous as that? Well it is clear that he was. They were at some pains to do away with Jesus.

He attacked the legalism of the religion of his day and the apparent complacency of religious people. He denounced those who kept the letter of religion but who had forgotten the true spirit. He criticised the keeping of pious observances by those who did not love and forgive their fellow men. He seems to have proclaimed a return to the pure essence of religion behind the whole elaborate paraphernalia of rules, institutions, ceremonies and priesthood. He was not the only one in his day to do this. There were many others. Perhaps he proclaimed with more urgency than the others; certainly he seems to have believed in the early coming of a great day of judgment. He was a thorn in the flesh of traditional religion, but this was not enough to engender the fear which drove religious men to destroy him. He was regarded as a heretic and blasphemer because he said, or it was said for him, that he was the Messiah, the expected divine messenger from God who would save Israel. It is highly unlikely that the leaders of main-stream religion at that time wanted Israel to be saved by the mission of a fanatical young man. The evidence of the Gospels seems to be that the Jewish religious leaders wanted to see the end of Jesus but could not gather enough evidence to justify

their sentencing him to death for religious offences such as heresy and blasphemy.

They handed him over therefore to the secular power, and it was the secular power in the person of Pontius Pilate which sentenced Jesus to die on the cross. There were, then, secondly, secular or *political* reasons why men wanted Jesus to die. It does *not* seem from the records which we have in the New Testament that Jesus regarded himself as a political agitator or revolutionary. There were a number of these at the time; Israel was subject to a foreign power, and Jesus' going about, preaching a fiery message, gathering a rather motley collection of followers around himself, including some who did have political interests and ambitions—all this may well have seemed like political agitation to Roman authorities not over-familiar with Jewish thoughts and ways. Or it may just have been that the Jewish religious leaders were more easily able to persuade a Roman Governor that Jesus was a political revolutionary than they were able to prove to themselves that he was a spiritual rebel and reformer. Whatever the true explanation may be, it seems from the records that Jesus was sentenced and put to death as a political agitator, the self-styled King of the Jews.

When we come to the third kind of reasons, to be inferred from our general knowledge of human behaviour as well as what the records tell us, we can recognise first that Jesus was killed because his fellowmen *feared* him. He was rightly feared in religious circles and, in my view, wrongly feared in political circles. What kind of a man was this who alone could provoke such fear in others that they destroyed him? In religious terms, Jesus was a

prophet, the urgent voice of God to men in his own day; a prophet who addressed himself as much to people in the church as in society. In political language, Jesus was an idealist, an independent, a danger to practical, money-making, expedient people in the community. In theological language, he was a heretic who denied many of the orthodox teachings of his own Jewish faith. In social terms, Jesus was a fanatic—gentle with children maybe, but a wandering street-speaker, passionately concerned to be heard, a warning voice speaking against the life of the times, foretelling doom. In general, he was an outsider, a nonconformist, and in any society such a man is feared. He challenges, he disturbs, he threatens to change things, he judges the existing order either by denouncing it or by refusing to accept it for himself. This is the general reason why people wanted Jesus to die and therefore had him killed: because he was an outsider and they feared him, and they feared the fruits of his life if it long continued.

The death of Jesus was, in itself, a very small event in history, a typical human event on which, by a combination of circumstances, a great world religion and an extensive mythology came to be built. But, in itself, it was a small human event, typical of many others of the same kind, before and since. Through the centuries we can find again and again cases of men and women dying at the hands of their fellow men, both lawfully and unlawfully, for the same general reason as Jesus died. It was so with Socrates before the time of Jesus; in Jesus' own day others died like him; not many centuries later Christian martyrs died for similar reasons; early in the history of Islam Al Hallaj was crucified for believing

and proclaiming that God was in him, and more recently in Islamic history the founder figure of the Bahai faith was persecuted unto death for heresy. In our own Unitarian history we have a roll of martyrs, those who died for their faith because other men feared them. And those of us who work for Amnesty International today know that there are still many places in the world where men suffer, and sometimes die, because they are outsiders, non-conformists, rebels, against church or state.

Do you begin to see why we celebrate the death of Jesus as a human event which inspires and teaches us both how to live and how to die? Because the Christian tradition has brought this small event down to our day encompassed about by many thoughts and emotions learned in childhood, we choose this event as typical of human conduct which shows us human integrity, courage and faithfulness prevailing in conditions of primitive cruelty, religious and political corruption, suffering and shame. We see in the death of Jesus that it is possible for a man to hold fast to the truth as his own conscience declares it, in the face of indifference, opposition, misunderstanding and pain; that it is possible to accept death as the price of integrity, to endure suffering almost without faltering, to trust his own vision though his mortal life must end.

Had we grown up in some other tradition we might well have looked to some other life and death than his, but since our roots are in Christianity, we see in the death of Jesus each Eastertide the possibility that a man can defeat death and turn suffering into victory by being true to himself and his calling, not counting the cost. If we see this in the death of

Jesus, one so young, so much alone in human terms, so tempted as he was, and remember it not only at Eastertide but whenever we are tempted to go against our conscience, whenever we are tempted to water down the truth to save our own skins, whenever we are tempted to turn back from some hard task; then the humanly contrived death of the human figure of Jesus all those centuries ago shines with the light of divine possibility into our lives today, inspiring and teaching us how to live and how to die.

This is how a Unitarian sees the death of Jesus. It is not what the first followers of Jesus saw. For them it was failure, defeat, the end of a great hope and a deep love. They were simple men, in sore distress. They needed a miracle to make the recovery of spirit out of which the Christian religion began to be born. Traditional Christianity says that they got their miracle, but I believe they made that miracle for themselves.

*Why puzzled Christians
needed a
resurrection experience
after the death of Jesus*



IF you listen to the statements of traditional Christian spokesmen at Easter you may be as puzzled or irritated by the things they say as I am. I find it very difficult to discover whether these speakers believe in a historical resurrection or a 'resurrection experience', that is to say, whether they believe that a real person, Jesus, actually died and returned to life again, or whether they believe that his first followers were powerfully convinced that he had done so—in other words, if they believe in a real resurrection for Jesus or in a resurrection experience in the minds of his disciples. I find it hard to tell whether some Christian spokesmen believe in one or the other or both of these possibilities.

There must be some greater degree of clarity possible to 20th century people in this matter. There must be some escape too from the dishonest alternatives presented by those who say, year by year, that either the resurrection of Jesus Christ is so true as to brook no argument or it is the greatest swindle of all time. I say most emphatically that we do *not* have to choose between these two possibilities: a physical and factual return to life from death by Jesus of Nazareth, or the belief that the first Christians deliberately misled their aftercomers. I believe that we can take a middle way between those alternatives and try to see how the followers of Jesus, puzzled and defeated by his death on the cross, quite soon afterwards, separately and collectively, had some kind of convincing inward experience which they came to express in terms of a belief in his resurrection and subsequent ascension to heaven. In passing, today it is surprising how many people who appear to believe in a real resurrection believe only in a meta-

phorical ascension, although the two beliefs are closely related. If Jesus rose from death, he then had to leave this life without dying again—hence the ascension story.

The first followers of Jesus were not people like us. Indeed it is hard for us to imagine what kind of people they were. They had very mundane occupations, some of them were country people, all of them were intensely religious, to the degree that they felt called to drop everything and follow an itinerant prophet figure like Jesus. They were Jews living at a time when the traditional Jewish religion was under attack from various reforming groups, some with a political emphasis, some with a ritualistic emphasis, some with an ethical emphasis, some with an emphasis upon the sudden end of the world and a great day of judgment. In this ferment of religious activity these men chose Jesus of Nazareth and followed him, and it is fairly clear from the Gospel records that much as they trusted and loved him they were childlike in their understanding of him.

And then he was arrested and executed, all in a matter of a few days. There had been only one leader of the group. Jesus had stood head and shoulders above his followers and now they were leaderless. If, as the records suggest, he had warned them that he would die like this, either they did not really believe him or they did not understand him. When he was arrested they fled; when he died they hid. It was apparently the end of everything for the little movement his brief prophetic ministry had begun. There was nothing for it but to go back to the old jobs with towering memories of this man to whom they had given themselves.

But soon after the death of Jesus something began to happen to these people which changed all that. Let us admit at once that it is very difficult to discover just what happened. The Gospel record represents one reconstruction and many books based on the Gospel record have made many others. What I have to suggest is also speculative, but it has its own premises which probably not many church people share. My premises are first, that it was a human being who died upon the cross; second, that he really died; third, that there are no grounds in reason for believing that a human being who really dies, can, with God's help or any other, return to a living state three days later and continue in that living state for some weeks after his real death. We know of no such case. Cases of supposed death, yes; cases of spiritual kinds of living, maybe; but no cases of real death followed by a return to real life as we know it. However, these are my premises on which to base some conclusions about what happened to the disciples of Jesus after his crucifixion—conclusions from the available evidence, not in spite of it.

It seems that the body of Jesus disappeared. Matthew has a story, all his own (28:11-15), about Jewish authorities bribing the soldiers to say that the disciples of Jesus took the body away. On the other hand, there are stories in the Gospels which suggest that the women and disciples were surprised by the disappearance of the body. Our first conclusion might be that the authorities, Roman or Jewish, had the body hidden to prevent any new kind of fanaticism or martyrdom growing around the victim's tomb. This has been done to other leaders of men in history. But in this case, whatever

the right guess may be, it seems that very soon after the crucifixion we have a small group of people including wholly devoted disciples and equally devoted women, cast down utterly by the death of their master, religiously bewildered because they expected a spiritual victory from him, and humanly afraid that they would be seized and persecuted for having followed this man. Then the body vanishes. They cannot express their sorrow and devotion at their leader's tomb because it is empty.

If this had happened last week in, say, Edinburgh, there is still enough credulity in our human nature for a close-knit group of devoted people to begin to persuade themselves that something marvellous must have happened to such a marvellous person. We do not have to try to imagine what form the honest self-persuasion would take today — only to recognise it as being as possible now as then. But let us try to see what form it would take in the time and society of Jesus.

Already in the minds of his bereaved followers there was an awareness of Jewish prophecies waiting to be fulfilled. There was the prophecy of the Suffering Servant, there was the expectation of a Messiah figure, sometimes thought of as a divine king. There were in the society of that time, in the background if not overtly taught, ancient ideas of kingship and renewal, of the sacrificial death and resurrection of the god or the king or the god-king for the salvation or renewal of the world, or a particular people. Already, in the minds of these first Christians (still thinking of themselves as Jews of course) were the things Jesus had said and done which they may, or may not, have rightly understood. Reason suggests

that in their simplicity, superstition and devotion, they understood imperfectly the nature and mission of Jesus. So would we, if he lived in our time.

I believe, therefore, that their expectations of him were different from his intentions. They saw him as holy, even divine, in terms of the simple ideas of their day. They expected miracles, they looked for rewards in heaven—and they may have begun to see him as the fulfilment of one kind of prophecy before he died. But they were wrong about that: he did *not* triumph in the way they expected—and so his death left them puzzled and desolate. But once the shock was over, the faith in him was found to be still there; they still wanted him to be the fulfilment of their hopes and dreams (and who, having such a leader, wouldn't!). Had his body continued to lie in a tomb to which they could go, to reflect and weep, nothing might have happened to them. But that physical focus of their grief and concern apparently disappeared within a few days, and the disappearance itself lit up new trains of thought in these puzzled and needy minds.

I believe that in their heart-searching and mind-searching Jesus came to them vividly. It can happen to anyone in intense experience of a deep human relationship. Separated newly-weds in wartime can feel vividly close to each other over thousands of miles of space, and months of time. Jesus, I suggest, came vividly to his followers' minds, he became 'alive' in their thought, and their faith in him was linked to prophecies and ideas which contained the thought of a saviour figure, servant or king, who by death takes the world's burden upon himself and thus overcomes his enemies and their evil. The ideas were

already there. The Gospel records seem to show that convictions like these came to the first followers of Jesus, because, I suggest, there was a need in them, a gap in their faith and devotion towards Jesus which just had to be filled. But it did not all come at once, nor to everyone at the same time; there were arguments and doubts and downright disbelief, but in the end it came.

Because they had to persuade *themselves*, they did so powerfully (as is sometimes the case with all of us), and because it was a deep religious matter about which they needed certainty, when it came it brought with it consequences in daily living. Therefore the new faith had to be defended before other people. The stories of Jesus' resurrection appearances are the defence and interpretation of a faith inwardly received. There were different kinds of defence against different kinds of attack, stories more elaborate and more in number as more time passed. My conviction is that there was no resurrection of Jesus, but that there was an experience or collection of experiences in the minds and hearts of the first followers of Jesus which they expressed in terms of a resurrection belief natural to them and their own day. Christianity has been true to Jesus when it has grown upon each generation's own response to the life and death of Jesus. Christianity fails when the interpretations of the first Christians are made the rule and revelation for all men and all time and the substitute for men's own experience and understanding of divine things. We do not need a resurrection experience to believe in God or to follow Jesus and others like him. Our own age offers its own true paths if we will seek them and follow them.

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