

THE RESURRECTION WAS CENTRAL

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on April 14, 1968 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P. M.

In the center of ancient Athens, then the intellectual capital of the world, there rose a high hill known as the Acropolis. It is visible from every part of the city, actually dominating the entire city. Its sides were steep and its top flat. On the top the ancients built their temples. The magnificent Parthenon, temple to the patron goddess Athena, occupied the central position with lesser temples all around it. Slightly to the west of the Acropolis was a lower hill known as the Aeropagus. The two hills were joined by a saddle through which people ascended to the tops of both. The Aeropagus consisted of a mound of rock out of which seats had been carved. Even the ascent to the top of the hill was by ancient stone steps carved from the rock itself. No buildings crowned the top of the second hill, for it was the assembly place of the ruling senate of the people.

Into this ancient scene walked the apostle Paul on his second missionary journey. He was much impressed by the altars in the city itself and the temples on the heights above. He spent his days preaching to the Jews in their synagogues and to the Grecians in their marketplaces. Eventually he was invited to ascend to the Aeropagus and present his strange new teaching there. The account in the scriptures is as follows: "Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he beheld the city full of idols. So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with them that met him. And certain also of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers encountered him. And some said, What would this babblers say? others, He seemeth to be a setter forth of strange gods: because he preached Jesus and the resurrection. And they took hold of him, and brought him unto the Aeropagus, saying, May we know what this new teaching is, which is spoken by thee?..And Paul stood in the midst of the Aeropagus, and said,

Sermon On Mars Hill

"Ye men of Athens, in all things I perceive that ye are very religious. For as I passed along, and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, To An Unknown God. What therefore ye worship in ignorance, this I set forth unto you." Then he proceeded to indicate that the only true and living God was the God of heaven and that he had created the earth and all that exists upon it. He reached the climax of this portion of his sermon by pointing out that man was the offspring of God, as he quoted the Athenian poet, "For we are also his offspring." Continuing, Paul preached, "Being then the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and device of man. The times of ignorance therefore God overlooked; but now he commandeth men that they should all everywhere repent: inasmuch as he hath appointed a day in which he will judge the world in righteousness by the man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead."

Then came the reaction to the sermon, "Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked; but others said, We will hear thee concerning this yet again. Thus Paul went out from among them. But certain men clave unto him, and believed: among whom also was Dionysius the Aeropagite, and a woman named Damaris, and others with them." (Acts 17:16-19, 22-23, 29-34).

This is that Sunday of the year when the entire Christian world centers its thoughts on the resurrection of the Lord. With some degree of certainty we can locate the resurrection on the yearly calendar. It is one of the few events in the life of Christ that can be located as to the exact time of the year. The resurrection of Christ came at Passover time. Always the Passover is located on the first Sabbath after the first full moon after the vernal equinox. Since we have the same factors from which to calculate, we can discover the date in our time, too. March 21 designates the change from winter to spring. We wait for the first full moon, then for the first Saturday, and the day following is the anniversary of the first day of the week on which Christ was raised from the dead.

The Resurrection Was Central

The early Christians preached the resurrection as a central part of the gospel. All four gospel writers tell of Christ's resurrection from the dead. Luke puts it in these words: "On the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came unto the tomb, bringing the spices which they had prepared. And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb. And they entered in, and found not the body of the Lord Jesus. And it came to pass, while they were perplexed thereabout, behold, two men stood by them in dazzling apparel: and as they were afrighted and bowed down their faces to the earth, they said unto them, Why seek ye the living among the dead? He is not here, but is risen: remember how he spake unto you while he was yet in Galilee, saying that the Son of man must be delivered up into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again. And they remembered his words, and returned from the tomb, and told all these things to the eleven, and to all the rest." (Luke 24:1-9).

You notice in this reading that the women had come to the tomb to anoint the dead body of Christ. They and the other disciples saw him die and saw him buried. At that point their hopes vanished and they gave up their expectations of his establishing a kingdom. When the women brought the news of the empty tomb to the apostles, Peter and John disbelieved and ran to the tomb to see for themselves. Peter entered first, then John. Later John wrote, "Then entered in therefore the other disciple also, who came first to the tomb, and he saw, and believed. For as yet they knew not the scripture, that he must rise again from the dead." (John 20:8-9).

Peter Proclaimed It

Once they were convinced, however, that Christ had risen from the dead the disciples began to declare it everywhere they went as a cornerstone of their Christian faith. In order to notice the degree to which they made it a central part of the faith let us look at several passages of scripture. For example, in the selecting of an apostle to take the place of Judas, Peter said, "Of the men therefore that have companied with us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and went out among us, beginning from the baptism of John, unto the day that he was received up from us, of these must one become a witness with us of his resurrection." (Acts 1:21-22). A little later when Peter preached the first full gospel sermon as the church began on Pentecost, he spoke of one of David's prophecies of the coming Messiah and then said, "He foreseeing this spake of the resurrection of the Christ, that neither was he left unto Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption." (Acts 2:31).

A little later we read in Acts 4:1-2, "And as they spake unto the people, the priests and the captain of the temple and the Sadducees came upon them, being sore troubled because they taught the people, and proclaimed in Jesus the resurrection from the dead." Still later in Acts 4:33 we read, "And with great power gave the apostles their witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

When Paul wrote to the Romans he described the act of baptism in terms of Christ's burial and resurrection in these words, "Or are ye ignorant that all we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried there-

fore with him through baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we also might walk in newness of life. For if we have become united with him in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection." (Rom. 6:3-5).

When Peter came to write his first epistle, immediately after the salutation he opened the letter with these words, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to his great mercy begat us again unto a living hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." (I Pet. 1:3). In speaking of our salvation involving baptism, Peter also said, "Which also after a true likeness doth now save you, even baptism, not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the interrogation of a good conscience toward God, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ." (I Pet. 3:21).

Your Faith Is Vain, Unless...

These are just a few of the evidences that the apostles and other disciples preached the resurrection from the dead as a cardinal principle of Christianity. Nothing was more significant, as evidenced by their emphasis upon it, than the fact that Jesus had been raised. The crucial nature of this fact is seen in an important paragraph from Paul's letter to the Corinthians. Paul wrote, "Now if Christ is preached that he hath been raised from the dead how say some among you that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, neither hath Christ been raised: and if Christ hath not been raised, then is our preaching vain, your faith also is vain. Yea, and we are found false witnesses of God; because we witnessed of God that he raised up Christ: whom he raised not up, if so be that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, neither hath Christ been raised: and if Christ hath not been raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins. Then they also that are fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If we have only hoped in Christ in this life, we are of all men most pitiable." Our hope of life eternal depends upon Christ's resurrection.

From this dismal picture Paul then turned to the brilliant light of the resurrection. He continued, "But now hath Christ been raised from the dead, the first fruits of them that are asleep. For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits; then they that are Christ's, at his coming." (I Cor. 15:12-23).

Human Creeds Agree

Not only do we find in the Bible evidences of the central emphasis upon the resurrection of Christ, but we also find it in the creeds written by religious leaders in the early centuries. For example, in the Apostle's Creed, known also as the Roman Symbol, it is included. Perhaps we ought to say that this creed cannot be traced back to the time of the apostles, nor even nearly to their day, but certainly was in existence before the fourth century. It reads, "I believe in God Almighty and in Christ Jesus, his only Son, our Lord who was born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, who was crucified under Pontius Pilate and was buried and the third day rose from the dead who ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of the Father when he cometh to judge the living and the dead..."

Similarly, the Council of Nicea in its Nicene Creed of 325 A. D., included the resurrection, "We believe in one God the Father All-Sovereign, maker of all things visible and invisible; and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father, only begotten, that is, of the substance of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, True God of True God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father, through whom all things were made, things in heaven and things on the earth; who for us men and for our salvation came down and was made flesh, and became man, suffered and rose on the third day, ascended into the heavens, is coming to

judge the living and dead..." The writing of these and other human creeds was unnecessary, for the Bible itself is all the creed that Christian needed. However, I have quoted these two key creeds to show that throughout this ancient period of time the resurrection was considered central.

They Staked Their Lives

The resurrection of Christ is the crucial matter in Christian faith. The apostles staked their lives on it. They left homes and families, goods and reputation, and eventually suffered martyrdom because of their faith in Christ's resurrection. They were eye witnesses of the resurrected Lord. They had seen him alive, they saw him die. In agony they watched him die on the cross and then watched as he was buried in the tomb. A period of despondency followed until on the first day of the week he began to appear to them again alive. Mary Magdalene saw him, then the other women. He appeared to the ten apostles in an upper room, then one week later he appeared to the eleven in the same place. He ate breakfast with seven by the Sea of Galilee. He walked with two on the way to Emmaus. He appeared to Peter alone. He was seen by five hundred brethren at one time in Galilee. There were other appearances and then finally he ascended from the presence of the eleven on top of the Mount of Olives.

As eye-witnesses they were willing to stake everything they had or were on the factuality of his resurrected presence. Soon after the church began they were arrested because they "proclaimed in Jesus the resurrection from the dead." The text further says, "And they called them, and charged them not to speak at all or teach in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John answered and said unto them, Whether it is right in the sight of God to hearken unto you rather than unto God, judge ye: for we cannot but speak the things which we saw and heard." (Acts 4:2, 18-20).

Shortly thereafter the Sanhedrin arrested them again for preaching Christ. The text then reads, "We strictly charged you not to teach in this name: and behold, ye have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and intend to bring this man's blood upon us. But Peter and the apostles answered and said, We must obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom ye slew, hanging him on a tree. Him did God exalt with his right hand to be a prince and a Savior, to give repentance to Israel, and remission of sins. And we are witnesses of these things; and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God hath given to them that obey him." (Acts 5:28-32).

Saul of Tarsus was a brilliant young Jewish lawyer. He had studied at the feet of Gamaliel and was extremely zealous in his persecution of Christians. Then on the Damascus road the Lord appeared unto him and Saul came to believe that Christ was the Son of God. His whole life was changed. He became an apostle and ultimately died as a martyr for his faith. It was from his pen that we have read more extensively in this message than from the pen of any other of the apostles. He, who knew all of the arguments that the high priest and the others gave for not believing in Jesus, came to be the foremost proclaimer of the risen Christ.

Conclusion

The resurrection of Christ is crucial. Because Christ was raised from the dead, we know that he is no mere man, but rather the divine Son of God. He is worthy of honor, respect and worship. We must obey his commandments, if we expect to reach heaven.

May I close with the words which Christ spoke to Martha on the occasion of her sorrow at the death of her brother Lazarus. Jesus said, "I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth on me, though he die, yet shall he live; and whosoever liveth and believeth on me shall never die. Believest thou this? She saith unto him, Yea, Lord: I have believed that thou art the Christ, the Son of God, even he that cometh into the world." (John 11:25-27)