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When I was in college, over 40 years ago, the arguments were more prominent and more intense than they are today about whether Jesus rose historically and bodily from the dead. There was widespread consensus among believers and non-believers generally in America that deciding about that claim really mattered. You took a stand—you believed in the resurrection, or you didn't—and if you did, you generally believed the rest of the Bible and called yourself a Christian. And if you didn't, then you were intentionally not a Christian.

Today that question, that debate—*Did Jesus really rise from the dead historically, bodily?*—is not as prominent or as intense because, at one level, people feel that it doesn't matter to them, because different people believe in different things, and maybe it happened, maybe it didn't; and if it did, or didn't, and that helps you get along in life, fine; but it doesn't make much difference to me. I may or may not call myself a Christian, and if the resurrection seems helpful to me, I may believe it; and if it doesn't, then I won't, and I don't think any body should tell me that I have to.

Two Kinds of Unbelief

Behind those two different kinds of unbelief—the kind from 40 years ago and the kind from the present day—is a different set of assumptions. For example, in my college days the assumption pretty much still held sway, though it was starting to give way with the rise of existentialism, that there are fixed, closed natural laws, that make the world understandable and scientifically manageable, and these laws do not allow the truth of the claim that someone has risen from the dead to live forever. That was a commonly held assumption: The modern world with its scientific understanding of natural laws does not allow for resurrections. So unbelief was often rooted in that kind of assumption.

But today, that's not the most common working assumption. Today the assumption is not that there are natural laws outside of me forbidding the resurrection of Jesus, but there is a personal law inside of me that says: *I don't have to adapt my life to anything I don't find helpful.* Or you could state it another way: *Truth for me is what I find acceptable and helpful.*

What *Really* Matters

Now with that assumption in place, and that inner law in place, it doesn't matter whether Jesus rose from the dead, because, whether he did or didn't, my issue is: *Do I care? Do I find that idea helpful? Do I feel that it helps me flourish as a human being?* And if it seems like it doesn't, then I will just view it the way I view UFOs and possible life in some distant galaxy—I just don't need to bother with it. If it helps you, that's fine; but don't press it on me.

Some of you think that way without even knowing that's the way you think. You have simply absorbed it from the culture, since that way of thinking is woven into most television shows and advertising and movies and modern educational curricula.

So what I am attempting to do is raise the level of everyone's awareness of how we sift through the realities that are coming at us every day. And my hope is that when I put the resurrection of Jesus before you, with heightened self-awareness you will not so easily be carried along by modern assumptions from 40 years ago or post-modern assumptions today, but may, with God's help have a true concern for what *really* matters to you—not just what nature or your own heart says matters to you.

Paul at Mars Hill

I am going to come to John 20 in a moment, but let me begin with a sermon that the apostle Paul preached to philosophy-lovers on Mars Hill in Athens about 20 years after the death of Jesus. It's found in Acts 17 and ends like this:

The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed

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a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead. ([Acts 17:30–31](#))

At that point in the sermon, his listeners cut him off and mocked him because of the claim that Jesus was raised from the dead—which in itself is very significant because it means the amazing spread of Christianity in the early years did not happen in a gullible world that thought resurrections were normal.

It Will Matter to You

But notice what Paul said: *God calls the whole world to repent, because we have all sinned against him*—that is, we have not treasured him above all things. We are *de facto* idolaters. This repentance is urgent because God is going to judge the world in perfect righteousness. And he is going to do it by a man, Jesus Christ. Jesus will be the judge of every human someday. Every human will stand before the living God-man, Jesus. None of our excuses will work in that court. We will all be guilty unless we have trusted Christ as our Savior and Authority and Treasure.

This word from the apostle Paul is flying full force, with love, into the face of the contemporary assumption that even if Christ rose from the dead, it doesn't matter to me because I don't find it helpful. Paul is saying: *It will matter to you whether you find it helpful or not*. God's judgment of the world by Jesus Christ is not like possible life in another galaxy; it's like death—it *is* coming, and saying it doesn't concern you, is like closing your eyes and saying there is no such thing as light because it's dark behind your eyelids.

The last thing Paul says in his sermon in Athens is: “Of this God has given assurance (or warrant, or evidence, or proof) to all by raising Jesus from the dead.” To all! In other words, the resurrection of Jesus is designed by God to be a global warrant or assurance that repentance is necessary.

Resurrection Known Through Witnesses

How does it do that when 20 years have gone by, or 20 centuries have gone by? The answer is that God always intended for the resurrection to be known and believed through human witnesses. This doesn't rule out the work of his Spirit in opening our eyes. But it is always through witnesses. There were no tape recordings, no video cameras, no photographs. When it happened, God saw to it that there were witnesses, and that Jesus appeared to witnesses in enough settings that they were fully convinced of his reality and could tell others and then write it down for us to read.

When Paul says, “God has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead,” what he meant was that the testimony of those who saw him will spread through the whole world and be a valid warrant for faith, a valid assurance that this really happened.

The Way God Designed for Us to Know

Here's the way another eyewitness besides Paul puts it. The apostle Peter in a sermon preached about 8 or 10 years after the resurrection of Jesus said,

God raised [Jesus] on the third day and made him to appear, not to all the people but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. ([Acts 10:40–41](#))

In other words, it was God's intentional design not for the risen Christ to be seen by everyone—not even in the day when it happened. And not today, as much as we might wish we could! His intentional design is: He appeared repeatedly and with many proofs ([Acts 1:3](#)) to a limited group of people whose job it was to bear witness in what they said and what they wrote so that everyone who hears or reads this witness will be able know the assurance that God provides for the world about the resurrection of his Son. That's the way God designed for us to know.

That's what we have in John 20—John's eyewitness account of the resurrection appearances of Jesus. That's what we have in Matthew 28—Matthew's eyewitness account; Luke 24—Luke was not an eyewitness but lived and traveled with Paul who was, and he talked to many others ([Luke 1:2](#)); Mark 16—as we hear Mark's echo of Peter's eyewitness testimony, as well as his own as a young man living in Jerusalem; and other writings in the New Testament.

John, the Witness

On either side of John 20, we have this claim. Look at [John 19:35](#). In the middle of Jesus' crucifixion, John breaks off and says, “He who saw it has borne witness—his testimony is true, and he knows that he is telling the truth—that you also may believe.” This is what Paul meant: The world can know what happened in those last hours because there were witnesses, and they give testimony and

there are ways to test the testimony of witnesses.

Or look at [John 21:24](#): “This is the disciple who is bearing witness about these things, and who has written these things, and we know that his testimony is true.” The point of this verse is that an eyewitness is telling this story. This is not hearsay. And his testimony can be checked out with others in the New Testament.

So let’s let him have his witness to us. And you judge for yourselves ([Luke 12:57](#)) if these things are so.

“They Have Taken the Lord” (Verses 1–2)

Look at [John 20:1–2](#).

Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.”

Mary did not believe the resurrection had happened. She assumed the body was moved. This is another evidence how slow the disciples, including the women, were to believe Jesus had been raised. These were not easily excitable, gullible people.

Peter and John at the Tomb (Verses 3–11)

Then Peter and the other disciple—probably John, the writer of this book—ran to the tomb. John outran Peter and stood looking in. Verse 5 says, “Stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there.” This is what Jesus’ body had been wrapped in when they buried him ([John 19:40](#)).

Then Peter comes and goes right into the tomb. Verses 6–7: “Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there, and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself.” What does John want us to learn about the resurrection from this? Two things, at least.

1. Risen Bodily, Not Just Spiritually

First, Jesus has risen from the dead bodily, not just spiritually. Some are willing to talk about the resurrection as a symbol of Jesus’ ongoing influence or his spirit alive in the world or his soul returning to God. That is not John’s point. The body was not there. He had risen bodily. In fact, one of the most striking and stubborn historical facts is that the enemies of Jesus and of Christianity in those first days and weeks and months in Jerusalem could not produce the body. That would have ended the whole thing. There was no dead body, because Jesus was raised bodily.

2. Like the Body That Died—But Not Exactly

Second, this body was not exactly like the body that died, and yet it was like the body that died. There is continuity and discontinuity. This is important because the resurrection of Jesus in the New Testament is viewed as the firstfruits of the harvest of the resurrection of all Christians. As Paul put it: “Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ” ([1 Corinthians 15:23](#)).

The point of saying the linen cloths were there, and even mentioning the cloth that was bound around his face, is probably to show how this resurrection was different from Lazarus’ resurrection. Recall from chapter 11 that Jesus raised Lazarus after he had been dead four days. And [John 11:44](#) it says, “The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

Different from Lazarus

People had to help Lazarus out of the linen strips and face covering. That’s because he had a mortal body. He would die again. After the resurrection, Jesus did not have mortal body. He would never die again. “We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again” ([Romans 6:9](#)). Jesus’ body is different. He simply passed through those grave cloths the way he passed through doors in [John 20:19](#) and [26](#). “Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them” ([John 20:26](#)). But at that very moment of entering the room like no ordinary body can, he says to doubting Thomas, “Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe” ([John 20:27](#)). This was a physical body that you could recognize, and touch. And Luke tells us he ate fish after he had risen ([Luke 24:43](#)).

Why It Matters

If you think this does not matter to you, remember, those who are in Christ—that is, who believe on him, and belong to him, and receive forgiveness and reconciliation from him—will be raised with him. And Paul says in [Philippians 3:21](#) that Jesus “will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.” This is not a UFO, or irrelevant life on another galaxy. This is what will happen when God judges the world by a man, Jesus Christ.

If you belong to him by faith in him, you will receive a body like his, which will be suited to see him and enjoy him and enter finally into the new heavens and the new earth where you will spend eternity admiring God in all that he has made. And this world that we love so much, compared to that one, will be like a candle compared to the sun.

Do You See?

Here’s the issue: *Do you see?* In verse 8 it says, “Then the other disciple [John], who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he *saw* and *believed*” ([John 20:8](#)). What did he see? What did he believe? Jesus wasn’t there—just some cloths that he left behind.

Compare this to Mary in verse 18: She has met Jesus in the garden and spoken to him. She returns to the disciples and says, “I have seen the Lord” ([John 20:18](#)). We don’t have Mary’s direct evidence. We are more like John in the tomb—there is evidence, and either we see through it or we don’t. The issue is: *Do you see?*

The Witness Has Become a Window

Let me close with an analogy. Your doorbell rings this afternoon and one of your friends asks to talk to you. He comes and says, “I have some really bad news. Your brother Jim is dead.”

And you say, shaking your head, “I don’t believe it. I just saw him this morning. He was fine. I don’t believe it. It can’t be.”

And your friend says, “We went to the game together, and as we were leaving, this car went out of control and jumped the curb, and hit Jim. I knelt over him. I waited for the medical examiner. I saw it. He’s gone.”

And you say, softly, “I see.”

What do you mean, “I see”? You mean that the witness of your friend has become a window. And the reality in the window has become plain. You were not there. You did *not* see (the way Mary saw), but still you say—and it is right to say—with all your heart, “I see.”

“I Have Seen the Lord”

God has brought you here for this message and for this Scripture and for this story of the resurrection of Jesus and this witness. And my prayer for you, as we close is that you will now or very soon, by God’s grace, say, “I see.”

There is one main difference between Jesus and my illustration: He’s alive. It is as though another messenger crashes through the door while you are crying and says, “Jim’s alive. I talked to him.” That’s what Mary said, “I have seen the Lord.”

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