



Did Jesus Really Rise from the Dead?

WORD
on FIRE

BISHOP ROBERT BARRON

Friends,

The Resurrection of Jesus is the be-all and end-all of the Christian faith. If Jesus didn't rise from the dead, all bishops, priests, and ministers should go home and get honest jobs, and all the faithful should leave their churches immediately, because Christianity is a fraud and a joke. As Paul himself put it: "If Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain."

But if he did rise from death, then Christianity is the fullness of God's revelation, and Jesus must be the absolute center of our lives.

There is no third option.

This is why Brandon Vogt and I recently devoted an episode of our podcast, "The Word on Fire Show," to answering this question: "Did Jesus really rise from the dead?"

Below you'll find an edited transcript of the episode. My hope is that in pausing to reflect on this fulcrum of Christianity, you come to a renewed appreciation for the novelty, centrality, and power of the Gospel.

Enjoy!

Peace,
Bishop Barron

QUESTION: For Catholics, Easter isn't just a day; it extends all the way through Pentecost. Tell us a little bit about the centrality of the Resurrection for Easter. When you read the Scriptures, especially the writings of Saint Paul, it's always "resurrection, resurrection, resurrection." Why this incessant focus on this one event?

BISHOP BARRON: It's the be-all and the end-all of Christianity. You could pick out elements of the Christian religion and say, "Those are good, and true, and noble." But if Jesus didn't rise from the dead, then Christianity is a joke. It's a fraud. And Paul knew that when he said, "If Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain." Everything he did, every talk he gave, every journey he made was in vain. And furthermore, he said that we're the most pitiable of people if he didn't rise from the dead.

Again, I go back to Paul to answer your second question: why is it so central? He said that the Resurrection is God's "yes" to all of the promises made to Israel. We always have to read Jesus *kata ta grapha*, or "according to the writings." Don't read him abstractly, which will turn him into a philosopher or a moral teacher. Instead, read him according to the teachings, the writings. Go back over Israelite history, and what do you find? You find that God has been forming a holy people, trying to bring it to the point of being truly a priestly people, a kingly people. Through Israel, God wanted to unite the whole human race to himself. That was the purpose of it. But Israel was imperfect in its realization of this mission.

Who is Jesus but Israel at its best, meeting the divine love? It's Yahweh finally meeting his faithful people. What's the Resurrection but the capstone of this whole process? It's the great "yes" of God to all of the promises he made Israel. God promised to give them a land—and they came to realize it didn't just mean this patch of earth at the Eastern end of the Mediterranean, but rather the land of Jesus' own body. It meant to be a member of the Church, of his Mystical Body. God promised Israel life—and they found out that this meant life on high with God. Yahweh promised Israel the conquest of its enemies—and they realize that this happens weirdly through the cross, whereby the enemies of Israel seemed to overwhelm this great representative, but in fact, through the mystical power of his body, the Church, he's bringing all the enemies of Israel to the God of Israel.

So I would stay with Paul: the Resurrection is God's "yes" to all of the promises made to Israel. If he didn't rise from the dead, we don't have that divine "yes," and Israel remains an unfinished story, a prophecy without fulfillment. The Resurrection is the capstone, the culmination, or to use Irenaeus' language, the recapitulation of the whole history of Israel. That is why it's so central.

QUESTION: I've had many friends who wonder why Jesus wasn't clearer with his friends and his followers that he was going to rise from the dead. He never just comes out and says, "On the third day after I'm crucified, I'm going to be resurrected." Why do you think Jesus seemed to keep this event, which you describe as the capstone, somewhat shrouded, even among his closest friends?

BISHOP BARRON: I hesitate to say he never talked about it. Think of when they came down from the Mount of Transfiguration. It says, “they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what rising from the dead meant.” And after Peter’s confession, Jesus says, “The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected...and be killed, and on the third day be raised.” So he did hint at it, certainly.

However, following N.T. Wright, I will say that the Resurrection was not what they were expecting. They were expecting the fulfillment of Israel, which most of them thought of in terms of the reemergence of a Davidic king who would put Israel’s enemies to rights and would reestablish the earthly kingdom of Israel. But what they saw in Jesus was that this was the fulfillment, but in the most unexpected way. It is true that they didn’t quite get it when he hinted at it. They didn’t know what he was talking about. So in some ways, it might have been just a waste of breath and time to be explaining in great detail something that they wouldn’t understand.

Look at Paul after the Resurrection. After he saw the risen Jesus, he didn’t commence his missionary career right away. It says that he went to Arabia for years. And I think what he was trying to do was figure it out: “What in the world? What does this mean?” And then he did figure it out, and what we got from that was the Christian Gospel. What Paul figured out was what the death and Resurrection of Jesus meant for Israel and therefore for the world.

So the Resurrection is indeed the fulfillment of Israel, but in the most unexpected way.

QUESTION: You mentioned the great Anglican scholar N.T. Wright. His meticulous and comprehensive book, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, goes over the history of dying and rising gods and the pagan myths. But one of the most fascinating parts of the book is when he distinguishes between resurrection, which is what happened to Jesus, and other forms of dying and coming back to life, including reincarnation and resuscitation. What are the differences between these and what is unique about resurrection? Why is it important to say Jesus was resurrected and not just resuscitated?

BISHOP BARRON: You're touching on so many complex themes, and as time goes by and as the objections to Christianity come and go, we have to answer different sides of the question. The two things you mentioned, reincarnation and resuscitation, mean in some way a return to this life. If reincarnation is right, then a soul leaves a body only to come back and enter another body, which then dies and comes again. It's part of that Eastern "eternal return of the same" philosophy that is repugnant to a Biblical view, which is very goal-oriented: history is going somewhere and coming to an end, a climax. The Eastern philosophies tend to have a circular or cyclical sense of life and being. Resurrection doesn't mean a return to this life.

The same is true of resuscitation. If someone dies (and let's say they even have a near death experience), and the soul, if you want, leaves the body, but then the person is revived and comes back to life in this world—like Lazarus, the daughter of Jairus, or the son of the widow of Nain—that's resuscitation. And it happens a lot now because of our medical skill. But that's a return to this life, and the Resurrection is not just that. It's a lifting up and transfiguration of this life into a higher pitch. It's not a repudiation of the body but a justification, transformation, and elevation of the body to a new and higher pitch of existence. That's what they sensed in the Resurrection of Jesus. If it was just resuscitation, why wouldn't Lazarus, who came back from the dead, be the Son of God? Why aren't we worshiping the daughter of Jairus, who came back from the dead? Because resurrection is not resuscitation; it's something qualitatively different.

QUESTION: When Jesus returns in his resurrected body to his disciples, he still has the wounds of the crucifixion. Why, if Jesus is raised from the dead, is he not raised in a body that is perfect and has no display of any deterioration?

BISHOP BARRON: One reason was to establish as clearly as possible the continuity between the Jesus whom the disciples knew and the resurrected Jesus. The wounds are a sign of continuity. But secondly, those wounds are so important, because they show that identification with human suffering belongs to the very nature of the incarnate son of God. Even in the heavenly realm, he bears in his own body the marks of his identification with our suffering, which makes him, as the letter to the Hebrew says, this "faithful

high priest,” who was tempted in every way that we are, who knows our suffering, and was made perfect through suffering. The wounds signal that reality.

There is a famous story about Teresa of Avila: the devil appeared to her in the guise of Jesus, and she saw right through him. He wondered why, and she said, “Because you have no wounds.” That’s a sign that we’re not dealing with the true Christ.

It’s this Jesus whom they knew, this Jesus who was nailed to a cross and who was risen from the dead—not someone else, or something else. I’m always moved when I hear the great charismatic sermon of Saint Peter on Pentecost. Peter says, “We were chosen by God as witnesses...who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.” That line sort of flies by our consciousness, but it’s breathtaking. Here’s this Peter, whom we can identify—his body, the remains of it, lie under Saint Peter’s Basilica in Rome, which you could see to this day—and he knew Jesus. He knew this Galilean carpenter. And he said, we “ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.” I find that staggering. It’s this Jesus, and the wounds ground him in the reality that he had before the Resurrection.

QUESTION: Let’s now look at some of the fashionable alternatives that are proposed by skeptics to cast doubt on the Resurrection. One of the most famous is the so-called “hallucination theory.” What is this and what are some of the holes in it?

BISHOP BARRON: We know about hallucinations, but so did ancient people. There's a kind of modernist prejudice that says, "Ancient people were just gullible. They fell for anything. They believed ghost stories." Read the Gospels carefully and you'll see that they were just as aware of these things—and just as skeptical of them—as we are. They were pre-scientific, but they weren't stupid. The hallucination theory would say that these "poor things" were all so traumatized by the death of Jesus that they had these hallucinatory experiences of his presence and naively affirmed thereby his Resurrection.

Here's an immediate problem with that: you'd have to hold to repeated and group hallucinations over a long period of time. One person having a hallucination? Maybe. What about two? Three? Four? Twelve? Five hundred at once, as we hear Paul say? A second problem is that Paul, who was persecuting Christians many months later, had no vested interest in prolonging Jesus' message; and yet, he has this vivid experience of the Resurrection.

So it really strains credulity to say that hallucinations were happening over and over again to various people at various times. I think that's a debunking that ought to be debunked.

QUESTION: Also, the hallucination theory fails to account for the empty tomb, which is one of the most widely attested historical facts about Jesus.

BISHOP BARRON: Quite right. The two things you really need are the empty tomb and the appearances; only one or the other

wouldn't do it. But when the two come together, there's an extraordinary explanatory force.

QUESTION: What about the suggestion that Jesus' resurrection is really a symbol or a metaphor that Jesus' cause goes on and that we remember him in our hearts?

BISHOP BARRON: Yes, that's a very common theory in the last two hundred years or more. It's been around for a long time. It was certainly revived in the mid-to-late twentieth century in Protestant circles, then in Catholic circles. When I was coming of age, a lot of the major theologians—I think of Schillebeeckx, Rahner in his own way (although I wouldn't want to overstate that), James Carroll, Roger Haight—they all would have versions of that: the disciples got together after the terrible death of Jesus, they remembered how powerful his teaching was, and they realized that through them his cause goes on. In Schillebeeckx's case, it was that they felt forgiven by the one whom they had betrayed and denied and so on. On this reading, the disciples invented these stories of the empty tomb and apparitions to express the symbolic fact that they were bearers of this living tradition.

I've always characterized these as faculty lounge theories, meaning they were cooked up by people who are trying desperately to make Christianity easy to believe. But as people like Kierkegaard knew, what is easy to believe usually isn't worth believing. And I love how Kierkegaard said his purpose as a theologian was to make Christianity hard to believe, because he realized it's only a Christianity that's hard to believe that's worth believing. Nobody

in the first century would've taken seriously the claim: "Believe in this guy because his cause is great. And he's dead, and he stayed in his grave, but his teaching was really powerful." No one would have found that compelling. Think of all the faux messianic figures, most famously Simon bar Kokhba in the early second century, who was seen by many Jews as the Messiah. Bar Kokhba was arrested by the Romans and then put brutally to death. Well, who remembers him now except a handful of specialist historians?

The point is, it's not just the cause of Jesus going on. Something happened to these disciples that was so overwhelming that they went all over the world they knew to proclaim it. And every one of them, except for John, died declaring the truth of what they were teaching. This was not some little inner subjective experience. Who cares about that? It was something so objective and so real to them that it sent them careering around the world. I think that's something we have to come to grips with historically.

Go back to N.T. Wright again. One of his claims is that, on historical grounds, it's very hard to explain Christianity's endurance as a messianic movement apart from the Resurrection, because the expectation was that the Messiah would deal with the enemies of Israel. But Jesus was done to death by the enemies of Israel, nailed to a Roman cross, died, and was buried. There's no better argument against his being the Messiah than that—unless some greater power emerged and intervened, raising him from the dead, and showing thereby that he did indeed defeat the enemies of Israel, but in the most unexpected way. Explain to me, N.T. Wright challenges historians, how Christianity endured as a messianic

movement, even as they declared the cross? They weren't hiding it. Paul says, "I preach one thing: Christ and him crucified." None of that makes sense on historical grounds apart from the Resurrection.

QUESTION: What are some of the conclusions that we can draw from the Resurrection? Or, to ask it more simply, what is the meaning of the Resurrection?

BISHOP BARRON: That God's love is more powerful than anything in the world. It's more powerful than sin, which you see on full display in the Passion narratives. It's more powerful than Roman power, which means all forms of worldly power. Think of Pontius Pilate and Tiberius Caesar and all of them that stand for this extraordinary secular military power, which put Jesus to death; and yet, he rose from the dead, showing that God's love is more powerful than even those forces. And then finally, it's more powerful than death itself, our greatest enemy, which hovers over the whole of life in this debilitating way. God's love is greater than death. That's why it's a victory; the victory of the cross is so important. If Jesus died and stayed in his grave and a few disciples remembered him as a great man, that's no victory at all. That's like the Abraham Lincoln Society saying, "Wasn't Abraham Lincoln great?" Indeed, he was; but nobody is claiming that your whole life is transformed by Abraham Lincoln. And yet, that's the claim about Jesus. That's the meaning of the Resurrection: that God's love is victorious over anything in the world.

QUESTION: When you read the Book of Acts or the Letters of Saint Paul, you see him careening all over the world proclaiming the good news that Jesus is risen from the dead. Most of us probably aren't going to march around our own towns and cities with Paul's boldness shouting, "Jesus is risen!" So how should we proclaim the message of Jesus' Resurrection today to a culture that is mostly skeptical of anything supernatural or miraculous?

BISHOP BARRON: Yes, that's a famously difficult question. Maybe we do need a little more of Saint Paul. There are tons of Christian preachers around, including myself, and maybe we ought to proclaim the message with greater verve and enthusiasm. Don't water it down. Don't render it symbolic. Don't use circumlocutions. Declare Jesus Christ risen from the dead.

We can also declare it in our own lives whenever we live utterly for God. When you do that, you're saying: "I'm not afraid of what's in the world. I'm not afraid of what could happen to me. I'm not afraid of what they think."

Look at the case of those four Missionaries of Charity in Yemen who were killed. There are martyrs all around us, and martyrs make sense only in light of the Resurrection. What they're saying is: "I'm not afraid. I'm not afraid of your guns and your power and your threats." That's the best preaching of the Resurrection you could find: the martyrs.

QUESTION: Talk about the significance of Christianity in general, but Jesus as a religious founder in particular, being rooted in history contra many other major religions?

BISHOP BARRON: I've loved the myths ever since I was a kid. I remember reading the Greek and Roman myths as a kid, and I did a little report with pictures. I loved the Greek and Roman myths. They're beautiful. I still love them.

I remember watching Joseph Campbell many years ago in his famous interview with Bill Moyers. Campbell was a brilliant articulator of the mythic systems of the world and he held to the monomyth theory, which said that all myths—from ancient mythology up to *Star Wars*—are just different incarnations of the monomyth, the great story of the hero's journey. I love that. And I remember Campbell said that myths explain things cosmically, politically, and psychologically. And they do. I'm giving an encomium to the myths, because I think they are of extraordinary beauty and explanatory power.

Having said all of that, and not gainsaying even a little bit of it, Jesus is not a mythic figure. When J.R.R. Tolkien was trying to explain this to C.S. Lewis, he said that the Christian story is like a myth, but with the decisive difference that it really happened. It really happened in history. It's not just a hope or the articulation of a dream or an archetypal fantasy. It happened. It's a real myth. The incarnation—God becoming flesh in space and time—is the historical acting out, if you want, of these mythic anticipations.

I like how G.K. Chesterton and many others see the links between Christianity and the myths. The myths are good dreams—the human race dreaming about what would come. When Jesus comes, you realize they all have their place now in relation to him. It's of decisive significance that Jesus is something else, something other, which doesn't put down the myths, but in fact allows the myths to find their proper purpose.

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