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The Resurrection of Jesus and the Reality of the Gospel

By Albert Mohler

The pattern of the Christian year is an exercise of the Church's discipline. The annual celebrations of Christmas and Resurrection Day force the Church to ponder again the truths of Christ's Incarnation and resurrection.

Christians understand that every Lord's Day is Resurrection Day, but this Sunday is the festival which draws all Christians face to face with the empty tomb and the truth of the resurrected Lord.

Resurrection Sunday is the central event in the church year—the climax of worship, expectation, and celebration. This celebration is also an acid test of the Church's faithfulness and conviction.

The secular world has done its best to make a mess of Christmas, but it has largely ignored our celebration of the Resurrection. Where commercialism intrudes, it comes in the forms of eggs and chicks and rabbits—none of which claim any connection with the Resurrection. The fact is, the secular world will attempt to domesticate, commercialize, and tame the babe in the manger—but it will run at

breakneck speed from the cross and the empty tomb.

That cross stands as condemnation on all human attempts at self-righteousness, and the fallen world will do all within its power to hide the cross from sight. The empty tomb is the seal and confirmation of the cross, and the world will shield its eyes.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead separates Christianity from all mere religion—whatever its form. Christianity without the literal, physical resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is merely one religion among many. “And if Christ is not risen,” said the Apostle Paul, “then our preaching is empty and your faith is in vain” [1 Corinthians 15:14]. Furthermore, “You are still in your sins!” [v. 17b]. Paul could not have chosen stronger language. “If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable” [v. 19].

Yet, the resurrection of Jesus Christ has been under persistent attacks since the Apostolic age. Why? Because it is the central confirmation of Jesus' identity as the incarnate Son of God, and the ultimate sign of Christ's completed work of atonement, redemption, reconciliation, and salvation. Those who oppose Christ, whether first century religious leaders or twentieth century secularists, recognize the Resurrection as the vindication of Christ against His enemies.

Those who would attack the Church

and reject its gospel must direct their arrows at the most crucial truth claim of the New Testament and the disciples: That Jesus Christ, having suffered death on a cross, though sinless, having borne the sins of those He came to save, having been buried in a sealed and guarded grave, was raised by the power of God on the third day.

As Paul well understood, Christianity stands or falls with the empty grave. If Christ is not raised, we are to be pitied, for our faith is in vain. Those who would preach a resurrectionless Christianity have exchanged the truth of the gospel for a lie. But, asserted Paul, Christ is risen from the dead. Our faith is not in vain, but is in the risen Lord. He willingly faced death on a cross and defeated death from the grave. The Resurrection is the ultimate sign of God's vindication of His Son.

As John A. Broadus preached over a century ago: "It was the signed manual of the Deity, it was the seal of the Sovereign of the Universe affixed to His claim, it declared Him to be all that He had ever professed to be, and so it establishes the truth of all His teachings and the truth of the whole Christian society. The great fact that Jesus Christ rose from the dead is the central fact of the evidence of Christianity."

Believers have no reason to be defensive concerning the Resurrection. To the contrary, any denial of the Resurrection is a denial of the Savior. The biblical evidence is overwhelming.

As the disciples preached in the earliest Christian sermons, "This Jesus God has raised up, of whom we are all witnesses Therefore, let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ" [Acts 2:32,36].

The Resurrection was not a dawning awareness of Christ's continuing presence among the disciples, it was the literal, physical raising of Jesus' body from the dead. The Church is founded upon the resurrected Lord, who appeared among His disciples and was seen by hundreds of others.

The Church does not have mere *permission* to celebrate the Resurrection, it has a *mandate* to proclaim the truth that God raised Jesus Christ from the dead. The resurrected Lord gave the Church a sacred commission to take the gospel throughout the world. As Paul made clear, the resurrection of Christ also comes as a comfort to the believer, for His defeat of death is a foretaste and promise of our own resurrection by His power. "For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality" [1 Corinthians 15:53].

So, as the Church gathers to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ, we should look backward in thankfulness to that empty tomb and forward to the fulfillment of Christ's promises in us. For Resurrection Day is not merely a celebration—it is truly preparation as well. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the promise of our resurrection from the dead, and of Christ's total victory over sin and death. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is at the very center of the Christian gospel. The empty tomb is full of power.

Joke Break

After many years of studying at the University, I finally got my PhD!...or as some people might call it, I'm a Pizza Hut Delivery man!

How Not to Think About Death Like a Secularist

by Mark Dever

Editors' note: The following is an adapted excerpt from the new book *Coming Home: Essays on the New Heaven & New Earth*, edited by Don Carson and Jeff Robinson.

Allow me to introduce you to Secular Sam.

Secular Sam is very successful. He has a good job, a nice girlfriend, a beautiful apartment, a new car, and excellent health. He's humorous, intelligent, and personable. Secular Sam is also a Christian, and actually quite an active one. He has an evangelical background (though he's chosen to leave behind some of the embarrassing bits of it), is theologically conservative, and believes in the authority of Scripture.

Indeed, he's even come to see Scripture as the most satisfying explanation for all kinds of phenomena, from the origin of the world to the meaning of life. Sam, being a student of Scripture, can realistically examine humanity's sinfulness. He can even confute his secular friends with historical evidence for the resurrection. He knows that all of life is under the scrutiny of God's Word—not just religion, but also business, philosophy, ethics, economics, and law.

What is it, then, that makes Secular Sam so secular? Sam is secular because he expects to wake up in his bed tomorrow morning.

He's never even heard of what his grandparents called the "blessed hope." Sam's hopes and concerns, even about his own spiritual life, are all contained in this *seculum* (the Latin word from which we get "secular")—that is, this age and this life. Sam assumes tomorrow will be just like today, which has some serious implications for the way he thinks about today.

In 1851, Englishman George Holyoake was the first to propose a system called secularism. Through his journal *The Reasoner*, Holyoake taught that morality should be based solely on a regard for the wellbeing of humanity in this present life, without consideration for any belief in God or a future state. Of course, such secularism is of great antiquity; it's much older than Holyoake and *The Reasoner*. But from the shapers of the ancient pagan world to those of the modern pagan world—Darwin, Marx, and Freud—secularism has flourished.

Even granted the basic human belief in some kind of age or life after this one, we can easily understand how, whether in a society at large or in an individual, a kind of creeping unbelief can gain the upper hand. One may begin believing in this age as well as the next, but he will soon begin concentrating on this age rather than the next, thinking less of the next, de-emphasizing the next, questioning the next, ignoring the next, forgetting the next, and finally, denying the next.

As our churches have done more and more to help us cope with this life and less and less to help us prepare for the next, such secularism has grown in both the society and the church. In 1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:11, the apostle Paul exposes the hopelessness of

secularism.

First Thessalonians, perhaps the earliest of Paul's letters, indicates that the effects of secularism have existed from the beginning among young churches—which at the time of Paul's writing are just 10 or 15 years old at most.

The problem Paul identifies first is a hopelessness among the Thessalonian believers. Their ignorance about death—here referred to by the metaphor of falling “asleep”—is causing them to “grieve as others do who have no hope” (4:13).

Isn't that true of many people's experiences? There are so many who live with no hope and think like the secularist Bertrand Russell, who wrote in his essay “A Free Man's Worship”:

The life of man is a long march through the night, surrounded by invisible foes, tortured by weariness and pain, towards a goal that few can hope to reach, and where none may tarry long.

That is materialism, the belief that matter is all that exists; or as I've also heard it defined, “a stupid philosophy in which people invest everything in what will one day become nothing.”

Paul's answer, however, is that Christians do have a hope: the dead are in Jesus! Since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. (1 Thess. 4:14)

It's because of the Christian's connection with Christ that we have hope in the face of death, for our hope is bound up in him.

The first funeral at which I ever officiated was in Florida more than 30 years ago, and though I didn't know the deceased well, I knew he was not a professing Christian. His death had been a complete surprise, and I was called on short notice. I found myself standing around the casket of a man I barely knew with a small crowd of people, most of whom I didn't know at all. I began to wonder, Why me? Why am I, a young man in his early 20s, preaching to this crowd of strangers?

But I realized it was because I have this hope: I know someone who has gone into the grave and come back out. That's why I was at that funeral. It was not because I knew the departed man but because I knew One who died and rose again. It's because Christ died and rose that we can have the hope that if we're in him, even if we die, we will rise too.

Paul writes of God “bringing” those who have died in Christ—who have died as Christians—with Jesus. The word for “bring” Paul uses here is a word used of someone who is alive, not dead. But here Paul speaks hope to the Thessalonians based on their union with Christ. Death doesn't break this union.

Friend, if you have had a Christian brother or sister, husband or wife, father or mother or child depart, there is hope in this truth: The union we have with Christ is more basic than this life itself. Even as Christ died and rose, we too—as those united with him—will die and rise again. Those who die in Christ will, as it were, come back “with him” when he returns.

And this blessed hope is the antithesis to the thinking of Secular Sam and all who live as if this present world is our final destiny.