

# What Resurrection Isn't; What Resurrection Is

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## **Matthew 27:45-55** (NRSV)

From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "This man is calling for Elijah." At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink. But the others said, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him."

Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many.

## **1 Corinthians 15:35-58**

*Christians in first-century Corinth were in danger of losing their grip on the Gospel. So when he wrote to them, Paul the Apostle reaffirmed the Gospel's core. He reaffirmed the hope of resurrection. He reaffirmed the fact of resurrection. Then he turned to the nature of resurrection.*

But someone will say, "How are the dead raised? What sort of body do they come with?" Moron! What you sow — it's not made alive if it doesn't die. What you sow — you aren't sowing the "body" that it will become, but a bare seed, of wheat perhaps or of something else. And God gives it the "body" he wishes, to each seed its own "body."

All "flesh" isn't the same. There's one "flesh" for people, another for animals, another for birds, another for fish. There are heavenly bodies, there are terrestrial bodies; heavenly glory is one thing, terrestrial another. There's the glory of the sun, there's the glory of the moon, there's the glory of the stars. And star differs from star in glory.

It's like this with the resurrection of the dead. It's sown perishable; it's raised imperishable. It's sown in dishonor; it's raised in glory. It's sown in weakness; it's raised in power. It's sown a natural body; it's raised a spiritual body.

If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual. Just as it's written, "The first person, Adam, became a living being, the last Adam a life-giving spirit." The spiritual isn't first, but the natural, then the spiritual. The first person was from the earth — dusty; the second person was from heaven. As it is with the dusty one, so it is with the dusty; as it is with the heavenly one, so it is with the heavenly. And just as we bore the image of the dusty one, we also will bear the image of the heavenly one.

Family, I tell you this: Flesh and blood are not able to inherit the kingdom of God, nor is the perishable able to inherit the imperishable. Look, I'm telling you something that wasn't known before. All of us won't sleep, but all of us will be changed, in a moment, in the blink of an eye, at the final trumpet. The trumpet will blow, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed, because this perishable [body] has to clothe itself with imperishability; this mortal [body] has to clothe itself with immortality.

When this perishable [body] clothes itself with imperishability and this mortal [body] clothes itself with immortality, then it will be as it is written: "Death was swallowed up in victory. Where is your

victory, death? Where is your sting, death?” Sin is death’s sting, and the law is sin’s power. Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!

And so, my dear family, be firm, unmovable, always overflowing in the Lord’s work, knowing that, in the Lord, your labor is not for nothing.

### **Children’s Story**

Yakov and Miryam did not like going to the cemetery. Too many times they had joined the procession to the cemetery outside their village to lay to rest someone they had loved: Yakov’s mother, Miryam’s uncle, even their own daughter.

Yakov and Miryam did not like going to the cemetery. It was such a final journey. When you carried someone to the cemetery, you never saw her again. And when others carried you to the cemetery, that would be the last journey you would ever make.

No one ever came back from the cemetery. How could they? No one ever came back from the dead. So it had always been. So it would always be. Until the Resurrection, when God would raise all the dead.

But when the Resurrection came, that would mean the end of the world. Yakov and Miryam were not so happy to think about the end of the world. It sounded awfully scary to them.

And now they heard stories coming out of Jerusalem. Stories about Jesus. Jesus had been crucified by the Romans — curse those Romans! And now Yakov and Miryam heard stories from Jerusalem that Jesus was alive again.

How could that be? Was it the Resurrection? But if the Resurrection had happened, that would mean the end of the world. And the world had not ended — not yet. “What a scary time to be alive!” Yakov and Miryam thought.

Until they heard the news: It was the Resurrection! Not everyone had been raised — not yet. And it was not the end of the world. But Jesus was raised, and a new world had begun, a world that one day would have no cemeteries. What a wonderful time to be alive!

### **Sermon**

God is not great. So says Christopher Hitchens in his latest book, from the title page on. Hitchens is a British-born journalist known for his cranky iconoclasm, especially against religious institutions, religious people, and religion itself. He has taken on Al Sharpton and Mother Teresa, the Archbishop of Canterbury and Jerry Falwell. Now, in his latest book — one of several recent anti-religious outbursts hovering on or near the best-seller lists — Hitchens takes on Almighty God. And he does so with the kind of confident assertiveness (“certainty,” we might call it) that he excoriates in his opponents.

Hitchens seems to be everywhere these days. Of course! He’s on a book tour, and all the fawning media oblige him in his quest for publicity. He’s been keeping a book-tour-diary of sorts online. I read part of it the other day, and I saw how Hitchens exploits uncertainty and confusion among religious believers to score debating points. So I decided that there is one bit of confusion, at least, that I don’t want to see around here. It’s confusion about resurrection.

**Here’s what Hitchens has to say in his online diary.** During a debate in Los Angeles, he raised this question: Doesn’t Matthew’s story about graves opening and the once-dead walking the streets “cheapen the idea of resurrection”? I take his question to mean this: If you have all sorts of people rising from their graves on that Passover weekend, then what’s so special about Jesus rising from his grave? Not a bad question, not at all.

Hitchens reports a not-terribly-sharp response from his debating opponent. This opponent, who happens to be a minister of the Gospel, said (according to Hitchens) that as a Christian he believes that those people left their graves, but as a historian he has his doubts. What kind of response is that? You have to be a historian to doubt that people walked out of their graves? Isn’t being human enough? None

of us has ever seen dead people come back to life. We all know better than that, not just the historians among us. So Matthew's story is a doubt-worthy story. It takes faith to believe it, whether you're a historian or not.

**But does Matthew's story "cheapen the idea of resurrection" (to use Hitchens' words)?** The short answer? No. Not at all. Why not? Because the story Matthew tells is not a story of resurrection.

Matthew tells the story briefly, but very carefully. Though these "holy people" came out of their tombs, entered Jerusalem, and appeared to many after Jesus' resurrection on Sunday, their tombs opened and they were raised from death at the time of Jesus' death on Friday. By this careful story-telling, Matthew makes a distinction between what happened to those "holy people" on Friday and what happened to Jesus on Sunday. What happened on Friday was not resurrection. It was something else. It was something less. It was "merely" coming to life again after being dead. And that is not what resurrection is.

**Resurrection is something else altogether.** Resurrection can be hard to imagine, it can be hard to describe, because none of us has ever seen resurrection, and none of us has ever experienced resurrection.

Imagine describing the Grand Canyon to someone who has never been there. Now imagine describing the Grand Canyon if you have never been there yourself, if you have never stood on the south rim. And now imagine describing the Grand Canyon if you have never even seen a picture of it.

Or imagine describing what it's like to be in love to someone who has never been in love. Even when you yourself have been in love, it's hard to describe. It might take poetry, or a song.

*I've got sunshine on a cloudy day.*

*When it's cold outside, I've got the month of May.*

*I guess you'd say, What can make me feel this way?*

*It's my girl!*

That's what it takes just to hint at what being in love is like. But how would you describe being in love if you've never been there yourself?

The Apostle Paul makes a valiant effort, in 1 Corinthians 15, to describe resurrection, a place he has never been — though he caught a glimpse of it once, through a glass, darkly. In his description, he resorts to analogies. Resurrection life, he says, is not the same as this life, this life that we know so well. They are as different as seed from plant, as different as bird from fish, as different as moon from stars, as different as heaven from earth. And what is resurrection life itself like? It's immortal, imperishable, glorious, powerful, spiritual. It's "different," he says. "All of us will be changed."

**None of these differences applied to those "holy people" on Friday, but all of them applied to Jesus on Sunday.** When Jesus rose, he was changed. It's not just that he had experienced death and come back, as romantic as that notion sounds. Rather, he had experienced resurrection.

Jesus, in his human "flesh," was now imperishable, immortal, glorious, powerful, spiritual. This meant many things. It meant that he would never die again — unlike Matthew's "holy people" or Lazarus or Jairus' daughter. It meant that he could suddenly appear and disappear, even behind locked doors. And it meant that in his changed "flesh" he could sit at God's right hand, ruling over the kingdom of God, which only transformed "flesh and blood" can inherit.

But Jesus' resurrection meant even more. It meant that new creation had begun. Jesus is the firstborn of the new creation. He is the first fruits of the new creation. He is the first instalment of the world to come. He is the living guarantee of all that God has promised, of God's promise to put everything right in a new heaven and earth. Jesus' resurrection meant that death had been defeated. "Death was swallowed up in victory." For the first time ever, death lost one of its victims and would not reclaim that victim. The

unbreakable death grip had met its match. And Jesus' resurrection meant that the general resurrection was assured. Some day "all of us will be changed." Some day we, too, will be immortal and imperishable. Some day we and all who "sleep" in death will rise. Jesus' resurrection is the first phase of the resurrection that awaits us all.

All the results of resurrection are actual for Jesus, but they are still only implicit for us. The old creation lingers. We still bury our dead. And we will join them. But like people in love suffering the exquisite agony of being apart from each other, our pain is soothed by the joy that will be ours when the final trumpet blows and we are raised to live with Jesus forever.

Christopher Hitchens is confused. He mixes up some "holy people" leaving their graves with resurrection, as if resurrection is merely a coming back to life. But resurrection is much more than that, as Jesus alone knows firsthand.

So if Hitchens or anyone else suggests to you that those "holy people" leaving their graves somehow "cheapens the idea of resurrection," just say, "No. Not at all. Resurrection is something else entirely."