
Easter - God's Response

DAVE BAST

Christ is risen!

BOB HEERSPINK

He is risen indeed.

DAVE BAST

You know, Bob, that is the great Easter greeting that Christians have used throughout the centuries.

BOB HEERSPINK

And in the church where I worship, we still use it on Easter Sunday morning.

DAVE BAST

I can't wait for that moment to come; but still, having made that affirmation, we do have some tough questions that relate to Easter. Sometimes I wonder, now what? Christ is risen; okay, he has completed his mission; he saved us from the trap of sin, but what does it mean for our lives now as we follow him?

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, and I am sure if we ask those questions, so do those listening to this program; and that is what we are going to explore today.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

BOB HEERSPINK

And I am Bob Heerspink.

DAVE BAST

So, we are wrapping up, now, the story of Jesus' life and ministry. We have been working our way through the Gospel of Matthew, Bob, in these past weeks, and last week we looked at, really, the central event of Jesus' death on the cross; but I don't think we would even be telling that story 2,000 years later if it weren't for what happened *after* the cross; if it weren't for Easter Sunday morning, we wouldn't even be remembering Good Friday.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, exactly; and as we celebrate Easter, what energizes me is how realistic the Gospel is to life, because it takes into account death. You know, death for us is the final enemy, and it is an enemy that we find that we cannot defeat in ourselves. I was reading Fleming Rutledge the other day, and she tells the story...

DAVE BAST

A very fine preacher.

BOB HEERSPINK

Excellent preacher; and she tells the story of a friend who has terminal cancer. She was robbed of some antiques, and she said to Fleming: Well, you know, it can be fixed. The insurance will take care of it. And then she added: I guess everything can be fixed except death; and that is what we experience in our own lives. We cannot fix this. We cannot fix and overcome the last enemy.

DAVE BAST

But the Easter message is that God in Christ has done it for us.

BOB HEERSPINK

Exactly. What we cannot do, Jesus did.

DAVE BAST

Yes, exactly; and here is the story – the familiar story – from Matthew Chapter 28:

¹After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. ²There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven, and going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. ³His appearance was like lightning and his clothes were white as snow. ⁴The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.

BOB HEERSPINK

⁵The angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. ⁶He is not here. he is risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. ⁷Then go quickly and tell his disciples he is risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him. Now I have told you.” ⁸So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid, yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples.

DAVE BAST

So, the women hurried away afraid yet filled with joy. What a phrase! Let’s pick up on that in just a moment, how the resurrection of Jesus is this awesome, mysterious event, and yet it turns our sorrow into joy even in the face of death. In fact, we are going to be joined by an expert in ancient history, Dr. Paul Maier, after the break. So stay tuned.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

Welcome back to *Groundwork*. Along with Bob Heerspink, I am Dave Bast, and once again today we are joined by a special guest, Dr. Paul Maier, Professor of History from Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo, Michigan. Paul, it is great to have you here. Last week in the program we talked about the cross and its meaning. Today we want to talk about the resurrection. So let me throw it to you. You are an historian. You have studied thoroughly the ancient world and the world of the Bible, is belief in a physical resurrection of the body of Jesus Christ... Let me give you a range of options: Is it impossible for an historian? Is it possible? Is it probable? Or is the evidence overwhelming that this happened? What would you say?

PAUL MAIER

Secular historians, of course, will go at this, and the only way they can work with are the sources that have come down to us across twenty centuries. Now, you have the sacred sources, of course, in the four Gospels; all of which claim the resurrection and the empty tomb; but then there are also secular sources that do impinge, at least obliquely, on what happened on Easter Sunday morning – the first Easter; and what I have been doing in my own career has been beating the bushes of the ancient world to see where those two sources, sacred and secular, impinge on one another. Where are the points of tangency? Where are the bridges that can be built? And I have really had a lot of fun going into ancient history for that reason. As a matter of fact, I have been now a professor of ancient history for almost fifty years, and the students accordingly are switching the adjective from Professor of Ancient History to Ancient Professor of History. It

works in both cases. But the reason I did this is because I was so interested – so tuned in, turned on by the Sunday school stories we learned years ago that I wanted to know: Did this really happen? And for that reason, I wanted to get the secular context, because when you get evidence outside the Bible, does it contradict or does it correlate with the biblical record? And I am really pleased to say that it does correlate beautifully at repeated places. Last time we talked about the correlation of the secular evidence in terms of the Good Friday episode. Now, in terms of the Easter Sunday miracle of the resurrection, no I cannot give you categorical outside, secular evidence that will guarantee beyond a shadow of a doubt that Jesus rose from the dead. We have plenty of proofs. If you want proofs, just listen to the Easter Sunday morning sermon in your local parish. There are plenty of proofs. The personality transformation of the apostles is impossible to explain, except that Jesus returned to life; and many other such proofs that we are familiar with; but in terms of absolute, categorical proof that will convert the world, no, we don't have that yet. If I did I would put it in book form and have a bestseller for the next 10,000 years. The whole world would go Christian, which would be kind of nice, by the way, you know.

DAVE BAST

Well, you mentioned the transformation of the apostles. It reminds me of a quote from, I think, C. F. D. Moule, a British New Testament scholar, who said: If the existence of the Nazarenes in the First Century – in other words, the early Christians – tears a great hole in history of the size and shape of the resurrection, with what does the secular historian propose to plug the hole?

PAUL MAIER

Good way to put it; excellent way to put it, absolutely. So, nevertheless, what I did was to research the overlooked phenomenon of the resurrection. What is that? The empty tomb. Now, the early Church wasn't excited about the empty tomb simply because that is the throwaway of the resurrection. Who cares about the empty tomb? The fact that Jesus rose from the dead, that is the big message of the Church; but interestingly enough, the empty tomb is something I can get at as an ancient historian; and in my book, *In the Fullness of Time*, in the last two chapters, I demonstrated that if we use the proper canons of historical evidence, and use it correctly, that we cannot but conclude that the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, in which Jesus was buried on Friday, was in fact empty on Sunday; and I now advance that as a provable, absolute fact of history. Then I waited for the flack to fly; and I didn't get any flack. Billy Graham read my argument, loved it, gave me credit for it. The New York Times Book Review liked the book as well. I couldn't believe satisfying both Billy Graham and the New York Times Book Review, but interestingly...

DAVE BAST

There must be something there.

PAUL MAIER

Well, what is interesting is, yes, we can prove by two major factors that the tomb was empty. Now, I will tell you in advance, an empty tomb does not prove a resurrection, but reverse...

BOB HEERSPINK

You need evidence, too.

PAUL MAIER

Yes, but reverse it. You cannot have a resurrection...

DAVE BAST

Without an empty tomb.

PAUL MAIER

At least a decent one. Not a Greek resurrection, where the soul lives on... without the tomb being empty as its first symptom. So, let's work on that. Now the two proofs we have for the empty tomb: One is well

known. It has been used for the last twenty centuries. It really is airtight, and it has never been explained otherwise, and that is, answer the question: Where did Christianity first begin? And don't give me Galilee or Judea, give me one place on earth, the place is Jerusalem. This is the first place that Christianity was announced in terms of the resurrected Lord being the Messiah of the Old Testament, who is now resurrected. Okay, the point is, there in Jerusalem, least of all could Christianity ever have gotten started if the decaying body of Jesus of Nazareth were available at any point after his crucifixion.

BOB HEERSPINK

Just put the body on display and that would have been it.

PAUL MAIER

There would have been no argument between Caiaphas and the apostles. Remember the game they played back and forth and so forth. Caiaphas would have led them over to Joseph's tomb and said: Voila... Well, I guess he wouldn't have been speaking French, but I mean: There it is. Behold...

DAVE BAST

Eureka!

PAUL MAIER

That would have been like a wooden stake through the heart of Christianity at the start. The body was not available. Now, I edited that argument. My second argument was, and is: The Jewish rabbinical traditions also concede an empty tomb; now that is powerful, powerful evidence. Why? Historians have a problem, you know, whenever you get some evidence from antiquity. Did it really happen? We cannot tell, we weren't there, but is there anything that guarantees what this historian claims is right? Well, there are two methods we use: One is the criterion of multiple attestations, meaning do a lot of different ancient historians say the same thing when they are not copying from one another? Then it is pretty much of a lead pipe cinch that this really happened. The other one is the criterion of embarrassment. This is the one I love. Okay, you have an ancient source arguing in a given direction, but he has to concede something that doesn't help that argument, but he has to admit that, the ancient source does, okay? Well then, this proves that that really happened. That is the criterion of embarrassment; so the sources that were hostile to Jesus and Christianity should either have shut up about the empty tomb, but not admitted it. They never used the term: The tomb was empty. They say the body was stolen; and it is not just Matthew that says that. So, you are saying the same thing: The body was stolen, the tomb was empty.

BOB HEERSPINK

And there were other embarrassments actually in the biblical story, aren't there? The women's witness – that the women are there. I mean, you would never, if you were fabricating this story, put forward women as the first witnesses because they could not, as I understand it, legally give testimony in a Roman court of law.

PAUL MAIER

Exactly. You know, I will give you the version of the resurrection if Peter had written it: On the first day of the week, Peter, James, and John – the executive committee of the apostles – fully believing in their Lord's resurrection, they came out and their faith was rewarded. When Jesus came out and said: Bless you, Peter, James, John. Tell the other disciples and the women that I will meet them up in Galilee...

DAVE BAST

And by the way, you're the head of the Church now.

PAUL MAIER

Yes... Well, you know what would have happened. This obviously... even put the case that Peter had invented the resurrection account, do you know when it would have crashed? When Peter is about to be hoisted up on a Roman cross. At that point, you blow the whistle. Okay, a person can get hurt doing this gig. I will turn states' evidence.

DAVE BAST

Yes; there is a great, great article written by Chuck Colson published years ago in Christianity Today, but I saved it all these years because he talks about the Watergate conspiracy and how they couldn't even hold it together for a week or two when the threat was jail and embarrassment, and he ties it right to the resurrection. If this was some kind of conspiracy of inventing this story, the first time they got out the hammer and nails and the cross, that would have been it. Somebody would have spilled the beans; but they all went to their deaths saying: No, Christ has risen.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, and the very fact that the four Gospels have different testimonies. I mean, obviously the Gospel writers didn't get together and say: Let's cook the books on this and let's all make sure we are on the same page. I mean, you have multiple witnesses to the one event.

PAUL MAIER

The variations in the Easter account are wonderful as far as an ancient historian is concerned as a Christian because this proves they are not copying from one another; there is no agreed upon story. Can you imagine this coming to a publisher today? Okay folks, now we've got to coordinate this...

DAVE BAST

Two angels or one...

PAUL MAIER

One woman or three...

DAVE BAST

Yes, who went...?

PAUL MAIER

The people seeing the same thing will report the event differently. We tried it in a classroom experiment at Western Michigan University, where my lecture was interrupted by a bald-headed colleague of mine who wore a rug, and then disrupted the class, and then we asked the class at the next meeting to write what they had seen because the Dean wanted to know. You wouldn't believe the variations, and this was an honors class.

DAVE BAST

So it is indirect evidence as well, about the authenticity of the eyewitnesses who write this story. It doesn't agree letter perfect. The basic details are the same, and the stories can kind of be put together and get a...

PAUL MAIER

They can be harmonized easily enough, but this is how people report things. And by the way, whoever said it first said it best: Myths do not make martyrs. Now I have heard that countered: Well, what about the nineteen bombers in 9/11? Well, here is the difference: They didn't write the Quran, see. They thought it was true, but you would not invent a myth and then go give your life for it; no way!

DAVE BAST

Right; so, we have this basic story with its fantastic ending. Jesus of Nazareth, a man, as Peter called him on Pentecost, well attested by God who did many wonders, was put to death by lawless hands, and God raised him up, and we are witnesses of this, and we can believe their witness; but the question is, what difference does it make for our lives if it is true?

BOB HEERSPINK

And that is what we will talk about when we come back after a break.

BOB HEERSPINK

So, we are back to *Groundwork*. My name is Bob Heerspink and my co-host is Dave Bast. Joining us is Paul Maier, a professor of history from Western Michigan University.

We have been exploring the fact of the resurrection – that there is good evidence for its truthfulness, but now we want to talk a little bit more, Paul and Dave, about what does this mean? The grave is empty. Obviously that had great implication for Christ, but what about for us?

DAVE BAST

It's true, you can believe this even on an intellectual level, but that is not the same as meeting the risen Christ. You talked about the empty tomb, and that is important as a testimony to sort of what happened. Actually, we don't really know what happened, do we, the moment Jesus rose because that is not described.

PAUL MAIER

That's right. The whole thing is a matter of faith, there is no question about that; I mean, unless you have seen people raised from the dead lately; I haven't. So, I am not trying to say that when we bring all these wonderful historical proofs from the sidelines, that now we have proven every aspect of Christianity, and faith isn't necessary anymore. Oh, no; it certainly is necessary, and especially in the case of the Easter event; but the whole point... I think there are two points to make, and first of all, this guarantees the rest of Jesus' ministry, the resurrection does, because without that, then all the predictions he made would make him a false prophet if indeed his body were still available anytime after Easter. So this is the capstone of what he predicted would happen.

DAVE BAST

And the promises: I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me will never die...

PAUL MAIER

Well, that is the other link. The other link is what is in it for us? I hate to be selfish about it, but what is in it for us? This is what the world wants to know. Why become a Christian? Well, here you have, of course, the greatest promise of any religious faith in the history of the world, and that is that the grave is not the end; that what happened to Jesus will happen to us, too. He is the capstone; he is the model; the One who went ahead of us; the forerunner for what is going to happen to all of us: Because I live you shall live also, says Jesus. That is part of his message as guaranteed by the resurrection; and so, therefore, this has always been the hope of Christianity right from the start; and I mean, the hope, and more than hope. I love that passage where St. Paul says: If as Christians we have only hope, then we are of all men most miserable; of all things to say.

DAVE BAST

Just in this life, he said, yes.

PAUL MAIER

In this life, yes.

BOB HEERSPINK

And the very nature of the body to which Christ was risen to me really testifies to how the resurrection has turned upside down the whole world. Jesus does not come back to life to the same kind of physical life he had before. You know, the very fact that the grave clothes are undisturbed indicates that, really, something has happened that has brought in a new world.

DAVE BAST

That is a very important point, I think. You know, it wasn't like Frankenstein's monster that is lying there dead and all of a sudden he twitches and sits up. I remember one of my professors saying: If you could have seen the resurrection, all it would have been would have been a blinding flash like a supernova or something,

and then an empty tomb because his body was raised, not to this life, but to the life of the world to come...

BOB HEERSPINK

But it is a sign that the new creation has already taken hold in this world today, and as a result the world for us is changed. You know, the life – eternal life – that we see in Christ is already available to us today as we put our trust and confidence in him; and it is only going to become more incredible even as we reach the point of one day entering a new creation where all things have really been made new by the power of the Spirit of God.

DAVE BAST

Yes; you know, we started this program... we opened it by using the ancient Easter acclamation: Christ is risen; he is risen indeed; and it is very important that Christians say: Christ *is* risen. We don't just say: Christ has been raised, as though that is past tense. When we say: Christ is risen, we are asserting a present reality; and I just wonder, Paul, if you would respond personally to what that means to you – the fact that Christ is risen – Christ is alive.

PAUL MAIER

And the response, of course, he is risen indeed... Well, this is where Christianity... the rubber hits the road, obviously. This is why we are Christians. In a sense, this makes life ultimately meaningful. Otherwise, what is the alternative? Otherwise... and the atheist and the agnostic always has to ask on his deathbed: What is the meaning of all this? Are we simply leaves on a tree that get green and larger and they have a wonderful time in the summer and then they wrinkle and die in the fall and they drop off? Is that all life is? No, no; this incredible thing called the human being has to demonstrate first of all a creator God. I mean, I cannot understand where we come from otherwise; but also that this creation of his is not done in vain only for 60, 70, 90, 100 years and that is it. You leave your little mark maybe somehow, but that is it. No, this means that we begin something that really never ends in this thing called human life by God's grace. And so, I have to believe that this is why Easter is what separates Christians from, certainly, the rest of the world despite the pagan name, Easter, and so forth; the festival of the resurrection is what makes us all Christians.

BOB HEERSPINK

And I think of the way in which the women leave the tomb, with fear... I mean, they are just filled with this awe, but with great joy, and there is a joy that we have even as we face death today. I have stood by the graveside of loved ones, and the casket is lowered and you say: Is this it? Is this the end? And then the message of Easter comes right down to that very moment to say: No, it's not over; and even as we look at the world today and we say so many things are happening where it seems the wheels are coming off this world; why not just live and wallow in despair? The answer is: No, the ultimate victory was made. The Father has vindicated his Son; because when Christ was raised, it wasn't Jesus raising himself, it was the Father vindicating the work of the Son; and because of that there is a stake in history which says: All things will be made new.

DAVE BAST

Well, I think of that wonderful phrase of Paul. He says when Christ who is our life appears, then we will also appear with him... something like that. So yes, there is this hope for the future, but I come back to Christ who is our life. He is our life here and now. That is what it means to me to say: Christ is risen. So I can echo Paul: For me to live is Christ and to die is gain. So there is that future hope and promise and expectation that, no, it is not the end; but right here and now, you know, to know him, to make him known, to worship him... All of that is what it means to say Christ is risen indeed.

BOB HEERSPINK

Thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation; and don't forget, it is listeners like you asking questions and participating that keep our topics relevant to your life. So tell us what you are thinking about what you are hearing and suggest topics or passages that you would like to hear about on future *Groundwork* programs. Visit us at groundworkonline.com and join the conversation.

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