

Truer than You Might Think

I am the resurrection and the life.

Jesus Christ

We keep coming back to two basic issues which determine how we think of Jesus Christ: the reliability of the accounts of his life and death, and the difficulty of believing in miracles – not least the miracle of the resurrection. Indeed, it would probably not be far from the mark to say that of all the problems which surround the person of Jesus Christ, these are the most fundamental.

In this chapter, I shall attempt to supply some answers to these problems. In a few thousand words, of course, I can do no more than sketch the basic arguments. But I hope that even this will be enough to enable the reader to see that there *are* credible replies to both ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ agnosticism. As with previous chapters, a list of useful books which go more deeply into the issues will be found at the end of the book.

1. Can the Gospels Be Trusted?

Since the four Gospels are the primary source for our knowledge about Jesus, it is important to know whether we can trust them or not. In practice, this resolves into three issues:

- Can we rely on documents produced so long after the events they describe?

- Was it not inevitable that the Gospel writers would be biased? and
- Why is there no external evidence to support what they say?

1. *Can We Rely on Documents Produced so long after the Events They Describe?*

The first Gospel (probably Mark) was written between thirty and forty years after Jesus' death. This may seem a long gap to us, familiar as we are with technology for producing instant records of events. But in ancient times, it was a remarkably *short* period. The two most important sources for the history of the Roman Empire, for example, are the historians Tacitus and Suetonius. Both wrote at the beginning of the second century AD as did Pliny the Younger, a writer of lesser importance. Yet they recorded events which had taken place not simply thirty or forty years before but in some cases, more than a century. Two instances will illustrate the point.

The first concerns an event about which there is no doubt – the great fire of Rome in 64 AD. This was the fire during which the Emperor Nero allegedly fiddled. We learn about it from both Suetonius and Tacitus. But Suetonius wasn't even born when it happened and Tacitus was only nine (even supposing he witnessed it). Both wrote some decades afterwards; in Tacitus' case, fifty-one years afterwards. Yet their accounts are accepted with considerably less doubt than the Gospel writers' accounts of Jesus written after no less a gap, and in Mark's case a much smaller gap.

The second example makes the point even more sharply. In 49 BC, Julius Caesar crossed the River Rubicon as he returned from Gaul to Italy. The event had a historic significance which resounds even to this day. For in crossing the Rubicon, Caesar committed himself to civil war; thus irrevocably altering the course of Roman history.

Indeed, so decisive was the event that even now we use the phrase 'crossing the Rubicon' to describe actions from which there is no turning back.

It may come as a surprise, therefore, to find that the evidence for Caesar's supposed historic action is incomparably weaker than that supplied by the Gospels for any incident in the life of Jesus. As with the Gospels, we have four accounts of Caesar's action – all of them written by later historians. But the earliest that any of these was born was the mid-first century *after* Christ. In other words, the earliest account was penned about two hundred years after the event. The thirty or forty years' distance between the crucifixion and the arrival of Mark's Gospel seems somewhat small by comparison.

Yet there is more. All four Roman historians relied on a single eyewitness source, that of Asinius Pollio, which has completely vanished. In addition, not only do the accounts vary but Suetonius even alleges in all seriousness that the decisive factor in Caesar's decision was 'an apparition of superhuman size and beauty . . . sitting on the river bank playing a reed pipe.'

Despite all this, the story of Caesar's crossing is accepted as fact. In contrast, the Gospels – with far greater evidence and testimony to support them – are thought of as mythical. And while the supernatural is apparently no obstacle to trusting the four Romans, it becomes an insuperable obstacle when it comes to the Gospel writers. As the New Testament scholar, Craig Blomberg, has commented, 'Clearly a double standard is at work here.'

So much for comparison between other ancient historical documents and the Gospels. From just these two instances we can see that the Gospels have every right to be taken seriously as historical accounts. What is more, when we ask how Jewish (and surrounding) cultures actually went about the task of recording events, we discover a further reason for allaying our scepticism.

In brief, while modern culture is used to preserving information instantly through film, audio records and on paper, ancient cultures did the opposite. They were essentially *oral* or *storytelling* cultures. This is why the gap between the death of Jesus and the production of the Gospels is not nearly so problematic as we might think. People were trained to remember events and pass them on with accuracy. In Jewish society this was particularly well developed since all three major social institutions – home, synagogue and elementary school – were committed to reinforcing this oral method of retaining and conveying information. As Philo, a Jewish historian of Jesus' time noted, 'all men guard their own customs, but this is especially true of the Jewish nation. Holding that the laws are oracles vouchsafed from God and having been trained in this doctrine from their earliest years, they carry the likeness of the commandments enshrined in their souls.'

As we shall see shortly, this did not mean that they were committed to photographic recall. The exact words uttered by a speaker were not crucial in the ancient world. But the sense, or gist, was. Given the Jewish culture of remembering, we have strong reasons to believe that the Gospel writers convey the fundamentals of any event or speech. As Professor James Dunn has put it:

We should not assume that the events of Jesus' ministry and his teaching necessarily faded or became confused in the minds of the disciples who had first followed him. In societies where the *spoken* word was the chief means of communication, and where a large portion of education consisted in rote-learning, memories were better trained and almost certainly a good deal more retentive.

The problem of the gap between the crucifixion and the writing of the Gospels, then, is much more a problem of our misunderstanding of the nature of ancient cultures

than a problem of accurate recording. The obstacle originates with us, not them.

2. Was It Not Inevitable that the Gospel Writers Would Be Biased?

Matthew, Mark, Luke and John did not write in a vacuum. They worked within a tradition of history writing which reported responsibly. As Luke comments in the opening chapter of his Gospel:

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things fulfilled among us, just as they were delivered to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things carefully from the beginning, to write it out for you in an orderly manner, most excellent Theophilus, so that you might know the truth concerning the things of which you were instructed. (Luke 1.1–4)

This tradition operated within a culture of history writing common to ancient societies. When it came to recording events, writers regularly grouped material not just according to chronological sequence but also according to themes and types of events. This explains why variations exist between the Gospels in their placing of events or speeches. One Gospel writer may be concerned, for example, to collect stories about, say, miracles together in one place while another may observe the strict chronological sequence of events as they occurred in Jesus' ministry. The important point to grasp is that this was perfectly acceptable within the conventions of the day. To have variations between documents recording the same events was not a sign of historical inaccuracy but rather an indication that they were genuinely creative in ways that were not only accepted but expected.

Likewise, when recording speeches or sermons, ancient writers felt free to report not the precise words but the thrust of what was said. Thucydides, the Greek historian of the fifth century BC, was honest about this when he declared that 'It was difficult for me to remember the exact substance of the speeches I myself heard and for others to remember those they heard elsewhere and told me of.' Nonetheless, he also acknowledged that he could not simply invent or fabricate what others had said. 'I have given the speeches in the manner in which it seemed to me that each of the speakers would best express what needed to be said about the ever-prevailing situation; but I have kept as close as possible to the total opinion expressed by the actual words.'

The Gospel writers, therefore, wrote according to the historical conventions of the time – which tells us why the words of Jesus are sometimes recorded differently in the Gospels. The writers were not worried whether they had reported the exact speech; they were much more concerned to establish the gist. This was entirely in accordance with contemporary historical method.

Does this rule out the possibility of bias? No, because *all* historical writing is a matter of bias. This is true whether we are speaking of Greek and Roman historians or whether we are referring to modern scholars. It is impossible to write history without some kind of bias. The reason for this is that in order to explain events or develop a narrative, the historian must necessarily select from the welter of information available to her. But how is she to do so unless she already has some kind of working hypothesis in mind? The simple answer is that she cannot. In order to build up a case, she must start with some basic assumptions. Unless she does so, she cannot proceed.

But, of course, once these assumptions are put in place, they continue to guide the process of investigation.

Rather like the police detective who seeks to discover what happened in a crime, the historian attempts to reconstruct events on the basis of a theory as to what *might* have happened. Only as investigation moves forward can the theory be tested. But it cannot move forward without an initial attempt to conjecture what took place.

As historical enquiry into an event proceeds, therefore, the historian is forced to select and evaluate evidence as it comes to light. And again, she is guided by her starting hypothesis. If she is open-minded, she will be ready to modify – or even in extreme circumstances abandon – it if the evidence necessitates. But whatever happens, she has to sift and evaluate. In other words, she must *assess and interpret* as well as record.

Now, if this is the case for modern historians, we should hardly be surprised if the Gospel writers did exactly the same. But this does not mean that they deliberately sought to construct or falsify history simply for their own propaganda purposes.

Why? Because, if they *had* set out to falsify events, we should expect to see counter-gospels written by others seeking to refute what they saw as untruths peddled by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. To be sure, we do have other so-called 'gospels' which claim to add to what the four say. But (and here is the crucial point) they do not attempt to *refute* them. If the Gospel writers had intended to produce fabrications, they could have made a much better job of it.

Consider, for a moment, the ways in which Jesus is portrayed. If the writers had wanted to concoct a narrative about the Messiah, they would surely have presented Jesus in a radically different light. The Jesus of the Gospels is reluctant to disclose who he is; he refuses expectations for him to lead a political and military crusade against the Romans; he performs miracles but *sotto voce*; and, most significantly of all, he ends up dying in the most

humiliating manner possible since crucifixion was the standard means of executing the lowest of low-life criminals.

If the Gospel writers had really been determined to create a Messiah figure, then he would have been politically and militarily committed; he would have asserted himself as a national leader; he would have claimed the mantle of Messiahship as expected and would have used this to promote himself as the people's saviour. He would have sought to sweep to power on a wave of popular nationalism, and even if he had failed in the attempt he would have been portrayed as a hero. If the Gospel writers were intent on propaganda, they were amazingly incompetent.

What is more, they would not have included stories about the resurrection. If Jesus really had been no more than a martyr-cum-sage, the last thing the writers needed to tag on to his life was some weird tale about his coming back from the dead. The inclusion of such a story would only have served to undermine the credibility of their cause. Much better to leave Jesus as a dead martyr than have him appearing in ghost-like fashion for a few weeks to the select few only to have him then disappearing again. Who would believe such nonsense? – unless, of course, it were true.

We will come back to this point shortly. Suffice it to say that if the objective of the Gospel writers had been to produce an official 'life of Jesus' for propaganda purposes, they went about it in an unbelievably ham-fisted way, despite having thirty or forty years to get it right. It seems much more credible to accept that they wrote history in good faith according to the methods and conventions prevalent in their time. And if this was the case, we can't avoid the implications.

3. Why Do We Not Have Evidence from Sources Other than the Gospels?

The short answer is that we do, but it is nothing like as

detailed. We have already seen how it is not unusual for our knowledge of ancient history to depend on only a few sources. By contrast, the Gospels provide a superabundance of historical evidence. The problem is that because they claim so much about their central character, we instinctively feel the need for corroboration.

In fact, there is such corroboration, though on nothing like the scale the Gospels provide. The Gospels remain the only detailed accounts of Jesus of Nazareth we have. What Roman and Jewish historians supply is confirmation that Jesus was a real historical figure, that he was crucified under Pontius Pilate and that a burgeoning movement quickly sprang up which worshipped him as divine.

The most famous of these historians is Josephus, a Jewish writer who wrote in the final decade of the first century. In a renowned passage, he speaks of Jesus thus:

At this time there appeared Jesus, a wise man, *if indeed one ought to call him a man*. For he was a doer of amazing deeds, a teacher of persons who receive truth with pleasure. He won over many Jews and many of the Greeks. *He was the Messiah*. And when Pilate condemned him to the cross, the leading men among us having accused him, those who loved him from the first did not cease to do so. *For he appeared to them the third day alive again, the divine prophets having spoken these things and a myriad of other marvels concerning him*. And to the present, the tribe of Christians, named after this person, has not disappeared.

This has been a much disputed text among scholars. The words in italics are by general agreement reckoned to have been later inserted into the original by Christians, since it is difficult to believe that a Jewish historian who became an apologist for Rome would have written them; they are simply too blatant a declaration of Christian belief.

But even stripped of the controversial sentences, what

this passage shows is that the basic framework for the arrest, trial and crucifixion of Jesus contained in the Gospels must be reckoned as reliable. Moreover, as Josephus testifies, Christianity was still going strong a generation after its founders had gone. Josephus is close enough to the first years of the Church to have been able to deny its historical basis (which he did not), yet sufficiently detached to distance himself from any attempts at propaganda unsubstantiated by fact.

When we turn to Roman sources, we quickly realize that they had little time for Christianity. Tacitus, writing in AD 115, accused Nero of persecuting Christians as scapegoats to take attention away from himself for the destruction of Rome by fire in AD 64: 'Consequently, to get rid of the report [that he had started the fire] Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures upon a class . . . called Christians by the populace.' Significantly, Tacitus continues, 'Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus . . . Accordingly, an arrest was made of all who pleaded guilty: then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted.'

This extract yields a number of important clues. First, that, by AD 64, Christianity had spread to the centre of the empire. Second, that a large number of believers were willing to die rather than recant. And third, that Tacitus accepted the historical fact of Jesus' death. Once again we find that sources external to the Bible confirm the basic facts about Jesus' death and the surprising upsurge of a movement devoted not to his memory as a martyr but to the belief that somehow he had risen from death.

And so we come to the central claim of the Christian faith: the resurrection of Jesus.

2. Miracles and the Resurrection

In Chapters 7 and 8, we saw how belief in miracles remains a stumbling block for many. On one hand our 'hard' agnostic would have no truck with the biblical stories at all while on the other, our 'soft' agnostic was prepared to concede some place for them provided they did not have to be understood as literal, historical events.

The problem with both these views is that they just do not fit the way biblical writers thought. For them the miracle stories were not fanciful tales, however laden they might be with meaningful insight in the sense the 'soft' agnostic would contend. The Gospel writers believed they were faithfully recording actual events in the life of Jesus Christ.

Both positions, therefore, avoid the central issue: what the biblical writers themselves were seeking to say. Here, the 'soft' agnostic has few grounds for his view that they were deliberately using a 'mythical' approach. For if one thing is abundantly clear, it is that the Gospel writers believed they had collected stories of miraculous events that actually occurred in Jesus' ministry. In fact, the so-called 'mythical' approach turns out to be no more than a later imposition by nineteenth- and twentieth-century sceptics who could not cope with the possibility of miracles.

Chief among their grounds was the belief that miracles are inconsistent with a modern, scientific view of the universe. In a cosmos governed by immutable laws of nature, not only is there no room for miracles, there is no need. The biblical writers simply did not understand this and were consequently deluded.

For both types of agnostic, then, their rejection of miracles is based upon a prior assumption: that miracles do not, and cannot, happen.

We need to recognize this for what it is: a statement of faith every bit as dogmatic as the belief that miracles *do*

happen. Once we grasp this, we quickly realize that the rejection of miracles does not follow from a careful consideration of the evidence with an open mind, but from a prior belief that miracles *cannot* take place.

How then can we proceed? I would suggest that a genuinely open position will judge each claim on its merits, neither presupposing in advance that a miracle has taken place nor that it has not. The commitment involved in such an approach consequently becomes not an ideological commitment one way or the other but a genuine search for truth.

But how might we apply this to the Gospels? This brings us back to the resurrection. For if we can accept that Jesus really did rise from the dead, we shall surely be able to accept that other, lesser miracles could have occurred. As Christians have claimed from the beginning, the resurrection of Jesus is *the* foundation for faith.

Jesus' Resurrection Considered

Arguments Against

The case against the resurrection of Jesus runs something like this: resurrections do not happen now, and outside the Bible nobody has ever seen or experienced one. We are therefore wholly reliant upon the say-so of a bunch of writers who were highly motivated to concoct the story of their hero rising from the dead. They wanted to promote the Christian faith, so what better way to do it than to dream up a sensational tale about Jesus coming back to life? Considered dispassionately, we can arrive at a number of alternative explanations which fit with scientific laws and do not require supernatural intervention. In short, the resurrection can be explained without recourse to miraculous fairy stories-cum-propaganda.

This kind of argument is superficially plausible but fails

completely when subjected to close scrutiny. It has the air of a pub discussion in which its proponents know just enough to sound convincing but not enough to realize they have failed to think things through. This will become clear as we take the points in turn.

1. Resurrections Do Not Happen

This is really a version of the closed-mind position we noted earlier in relation to miracles. Consequently it shares all the weaknesses we observed in such a view. The statement 'Resurrections do not happen' is not a factual claim but is a disguised ideological claim about the nature of the universe. In effect, it says, 'Resurrections can *never* happen because if they did, they would breach my scientific view of how the world works.' The fundamental problem with this view, of course, is that it is so blinkered that it reduces every phenomenon to a single type of explanation – the so-called 'scientific' one. But even that is highly questionable for all the reasons we saw in Chapters 2 and 3. The biblical scholar, A. M. Hunter, makes a valid point when he comments that 'Gone are the days when scientists could dogmatically declare that miracles, because they were "violations of the laws of nature" were therefore impossible.'

John Polkinghorne is one such scientist. Formerly Professor of Mathematical Physics at Cambridge and President of Queen's College, he is now a Christian priest. Having thought deeply about miracles in general and the resurrection in particular, he concludes both that miracles are possible and that the resurrection of Jesus is credible. Two passages from his writings make the point clearly. In his book, *Quarks, Chaos and Christianity*, Polkinghorne argues that:

The question of miracle is not primarily scientific, but *theological*. Science simply tells us that these events are

against normal expectation. We knew this at the start. Science cannot exclude the possibility that, on particular occasions, God does particular, unprecedented things. After all, he is the ordainer of the laws of nature, not someone who is subject to them. (pp. 82–3)

Elsewhere he contends that:

We know that the world is full of surprises, so that confidence that we know beforehand what is reasonable and possible is strictly limited. Unprecedented or previously unexplored realms of experience may very well prove contrary in character to the familiar and the everyday. One has only to utter the words ‘quantum theory’ to make the point. (*Serious Talk*, p. 91)

2. *The Motivation of the Gospel Writers Was Suspect*

In addition to the difficulties we have already seen with this view, it also falls into the trap of assuming that commitment to a belief automatically renders a person’s testimony invalid. But why should this be so? While it is true that in some cases people will perjure themselves for a cause, we should not assume in advance that this will always be the case.

Imagine David, for example. He is a Jew who survived the Holocaust. He can recount stories of absolute horror from his time in the death camps of Hitler’s Germany. He is a committed anti-Nazi. Does this make his recollections untrue? Does it invalidate his testimony?

Or take Bernadette. She is a Rwandan refugee forced out of her home by the genocide of 1994. She has seen her husband and three sons butchered by people whom they counted as neighbours in their home village. Driven from her country, she has spent two years in a refugee camp in Zaire. In 1996 she returned home, feeling at last able to tell her story. Does the awfulness of her experience invalidate

her eyewitness accounts? Does her deep determination to see justice done against the killers of her family mean that we can no longer trust the evidence she has supplied?

Finally, think of Milan. He is a Bosnian young man who was taken from his village by Serbs in 1993 along with all the other men. They were driven to an isolated spot 10 kilometres away and shot. Milan escaped solely because he was wounded but remained alert enough to feign death. When the bodies were piled on top of him, he was just able to survive until nightfall and crawl away. In the morning, the corpses were shovelled into a mass grave and buried. From that day to this he has carried an abiding hatred of Serbs; but does that mean that the events never happened or that he will automatically lie about them?

Clearly the answer in all three cases must be ‘no’. Neither David nor Bernadette nor Milan can be held to be a liar simply because of the depths of their experiences. The mere fact that they had suffered terribly would not discount their testimony in a court of law.

By the same token, we should not discount the testimonies of the Gospel writers and their sources. Just because they had a message to proclaim does not mean that they would fabricate the story of the resurrection. Logically speaking, it is equally likely that they had a message to proclaim because the resurrection actually took place. And for reasons we shall shortly come to, the possibility of fabrication is highly unlikely indeed.

3. *Alternative Explanations for the Resurrection*

Once we rule out the possibility that Jesus was truly resurrected, we are left with three other possibilities: (i) Jesus didn’t die on the cross – he lost consciousness and was later revived; (ii) the so-called ‘resurrection appearances’ were nothing more than hallucinations; and (iii) the disciples stole the body.

Explanation (i) we considered earlier to be inherently

implausible because it just does not fit the evidence. Number (ii) has greater plausibility but must also be rejected. Why? Because (a) the appearances of the resurrected Jesus were too many and too varied realistically to have been hallucinations. He did not appear only to the twelve disciples but to lots of individuals and on one occasion to a crowd of five hundred. (b) Why should the Gospel writers have deduced merely from hallucinations that Jesus had risen from the dead? They could just have easily supposed the appearances to be those of a ghost. In fact, this would have been much more plausible to their contemporaries since belief in individual resurrection was both uncommon and outlandish. If they truly had wanted to convince as many people as possible, they would have been much better off avoiding the notion of resurrection altogether. To claim that a man had come back to life was the easiest route to becoming laughing stocks – unless, of course it were true. (c) The effect of these ‘hallucinations’ was nothing short of revolutionary. Which is more plausible? – to believe that mere psychological illusions caused the explosive birth of the Christian faith or that the resurrection itself did?

As for (iii), we have to ask why the disciples would have wished to steal the body in the first place and what they did with it. Given the weirdness of the claim that Jesus had been resurrected, they would have had little motivation to do so. Moreover, they would have spent the rest of their lives living and (in some cases) being tortured for what they knew to be a lie. It simply does not add up. In the words of Professor James Dunn, ‘There must have been something about these first encounters . . . which pushed them [the first Christians] to what was an extraordinary conclusion in the context of that time. A careful jury would have to ask why the first Christians drew such an unusual conclusion.’

So much, then, for alternative explanations. None of

them is inherently more plausible or sustainable from the evidence than the conclusion that the Gospel writers proclaimed the resurrection because it took place.

The argument, however, needs to go further. Having discussed the case against the resurrection, we must now turn to the positive case in favour.

Arguments For

1. The High Estimate of Jesus soon after His Death

It is striking that within a matter of years after his death, Jesus of Nazareth was being spoken of not as a great man but as God. Now it was not uncommon for individuals to be idolized or deified. But it was only non-Jews who did so. The Romans, for example, were ready to impart deity to their leaders at the drop of a toga. The truly amazing thing is that it was *Jews* who first proclaimed the divinity of Christ. So strong was their commitment to belief in only one God – Yahweh – that they were often thought of as atheists because they refused to accept other alleged divinities. And so, when it was from the mouths of devout Jews that the name of Jesus first came to be uttered as divine and furthermore worshipped, we have to ask why. To quote Professor Dunn once more, ‘For a *Jew* to speak of a *man*, Jesus, in terms which showed him sharing in the deity of *God*, was a quite astonishing feature of early Christianity.’

Yet this is what happened. The first disciples, good Jews though they were, within weeks of the crucifixion were telling all and sundry that the man from Nazareth executed as a common criminal was, in fact, God! And within a further short space of time, another Jewish leader, Saul of Tarsus, had reneged on his fierce opposition to this new sect and had joined them to become one of their most powerful advocates.

While these facts do not amount to a knock-down case,

they do suggest that something astounding happened soon after the death of Jesus. His followers, and those who in turn joined them, were sure about what that was – the resurrection. If we are to account for the Jesus phenomenon we must supply a persuasive alternative.

2. The Transformation of the Disciples

Two weeks before Jesus was arrested, the disciples were squabbling and boasting about which of them should occupy positions of power in the new Messianic kingdom they thought he would soon establish. Within less than a fortnight, they were in hiding, ready to disown him once he had been taken into custody. On the day of his execution, none of them showed up (except perhaps for the young man John).

This was the state of Jesus' male followers immediately after his death. How, then, do we explain their complete transformation within a matter of days? From being a bunch of demoralized, terrified cowards they turned into a band of determined, unafraid proclaimers of the faith, boldly preaching the message that Christ was alive and active in their midst. The hallucination hypothesis seems totally unable to bear the weight of this change. Similarly, the accusation that they stole the body collapses. For who would have set about the task of converting the world with such fervour and commitment on the basis of a confidence trick? What is more, it is inconceivable that these selfsame men would have endured persecution, torture and death knowing that it had all begun with a lie. Con artists are not known for their self-sacrifice.

Likewise, it is hard to believe that the faith would have spread so rapidly and to such effect (remember Tacitus' comments about the influence of Christianity in Rome?) had its instigators deliberately been lying. At some point, the Jewish authorities would have produced the corpse of Jesus and put an end to this new religious brushfire. That

they *did* not suggests that they *could* not; the body was risen.

3. The Witness of the Church

From its earliest days, the Christian Church pinned itself to the incredible claim that its founder, having died in public view, had returned to life as a demonstration of his divinity. This belief – weird as we have seen – remained the rock on which successive generations of Christians built their lives to the present day. It gave impetus to the missionary zeal of the New Testament, it gave backbone to the believers who were tortured or killed in the years of persecution which began within months of Jesus' death, and it sustains millions throughout the world today.

Moreover, from the first generation onwards, Christians have claimed not simply to believe intellectually that Christ rose from the dead; but that in some mysterious way, they experience his living presence here and now. Once more, it is hard to equate all this with either a living lie or a self-deception. Both possibilities, of course, remain open. But the inquirer must ask herself which is more credible, given the cumulative balance of evidence: that the resurrection was a hoax-cum-illusion or that it happened?

4. The Significance of Women

At first sight, this might seem an odd piece of evidence to wheel out. However, it is highly significant that the Gospel writers clearly insist that the first witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus were women. A brief reading of their accounts of the first Easter day shows that it was the women who met the risen Christ first of all and who then carried the news back to the incredulous men. There is no doubt that the writers wished to make it clear that women were the primary witnesses to the Easter events.

This is nothing short of astonishing. If Matthew, Mark, Luke and John really had rigged their accounts, the last

thing they would have done was to put the women at the centre. The reason? Simply that the contemporary status of women was so low that no one would have believed them. Women's testimonies, for example, were inadmissible as evidence in a court of law because women were regarded as unreliable witnesses merely because they were women. Even in our own times, this remains the case in some Middle Eastern societies. To have made the truthfulness of the resurrection stories dependent upon the word of women, therefore, would have been suicidal on the part of the Gospel writers – unless, of course, they really did witness what they said.

5. The Absence of Tomb Veneration

There is a well-known Sherlock Holmes tale entitled *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. In it, the great detective concludes that the crime must have been committed by someone known to the family who murdered his victim overnight while the household slept. When questioned, he comments that if there had been an intruder, the dog would have barked. It didn't. Therefore, the hound must have known the perpetrator.

A similar kind of logic applies to the absence of any evidence that the early Christians venerated, or paid homage to, the supposed tomb of Jesus. If there had been a body still buried at the site, we can be sure that believers would have gathered there regularly to venerate it and to worship. Such was the common custom of the day which persists even to the present. The tombs of Abraham and David continue to be venerated at Hebron and Jerusalem respectively, as is the tomb of a near contemporary of Jesus, the charismatic rabbi Honi, 'the circle-drawer'.

But there remains no evidence that the tomb of Jesus was venerated at any time during the first three centuries after his death. The conclusion? In the words of James Dunn:

This strange silence, exceptional in view of the religious practice of the time, has only one obvious explanation. The first Christians did not regard the place where Jesus had been laid as having any special significance because no grave was thought to contain Jesus' earthly remains. The tomb was not venerated, it did not become a place of pilgrimage, because the tomb was empty!

Summary

The arguments I have set out here will not convince the hardened sceptic. For those prepared to be open-minded, however, and to consider the case even-handedly, the outcome may be rather different. True, there is no single argument that will wipe out all doubt. But the cumulative weight of evidence, I would suggest, points much more towards the likelihood that Jesus really was raised from death than any of the alternatives. If this is the case, the agnostic must begin to ask some searching questions as to how long his agnosticism can hold up.