



Resurrection reconsidered

• By DWIGHT A. PRYOR

Resurrection is a biblical doctrine that confounds the modern mind. Though universally affirmed in church creeds, the notion seldom receives more than lip service in most Christian circles. Many seem to take it as a metaphor for some kind of post-death existence. All this stands in marked contrast to the Jewish mindset of Jesus' earliest followers.

For the first Church and the Apostles, resurrection was a conviction that transformed their lives and reshaped their theological worldviews. When on the third day God physically raised Jesus from the grave, a new age dawned and everything was cast in a new light, including Jesus' own death on a Roman cross. That which had left them in despair was now seen to have been a destined (Acts 4:28), deliberate (4:23) and decisive (2 Corinthians 5:19) act by the God of Israel.

Christian faith at its core is in the God "that raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was put to death for our trespasses and raised up for our justification" (Romans 4:24-25). Apart from the resurrection, the cross held no salvation, only another martyred Jew. The resurrection vindicated the Son of Man's sacrifice and exalted Jesus of Nazareth to the highest place of power and authority at God's right hand. It compelled early believers to boldly proclaim "Jesus is Lord!" even in the face of Caesar's threats, and to confidently confront even brutal death.

Views on life after death varied widely in the ancient world – from nonexistence to some kind of immortal bliss as a disembodied soul, to repeated rebirths. For Plato, the enlightened soul became an astral body that dwelt among the stars.

No one in the pagan world, however, held to the resurrection of the body. Indeed, such a view would have been

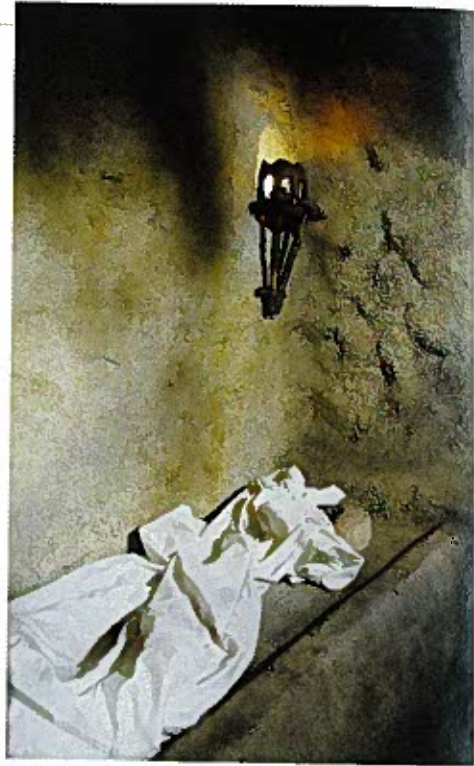
repulsive for Hellenists like Plato, for whom materiality was an evil encumbrance that imprisoned the pure spirit. For them the immaterial realm of heaven was ultimately the only real world, and the only one desired.

Second Temple Judaism, from which Christianity sprang, was unique therefore in its belief in the resurrection of the body. Not all Jewish sects held to a belief in life after death, such as the Sadducees (which is why they were so 'sad-you-see'). But based on the teachings of the sages, the Pharisees held the resurrection of the dead at the Last Day as a central doctrine.

Though only hints of resurrection can be found in the Torah itself, the Prophet Daniel's witness was authoritative: "And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt" (Daniel 12:2). Resurrection confirmed the ultimate goodness of creation, as well as the ultimate justice of God (requiring wickedness to be recompensed and righteousness rewarded).

Early Christianity held to this Jewish view. Resurrection was not the same as resuscitation. The latter only delays death; the former defeats it. Nor was resurrection a metaphor for some immaterial post-death existence. Resurrection meant that at the End of Days, God would cause the righteous to live again in transformed physical bodies.

The Jewish followers of Yeshua confidently looked forward to the Son of Man's return to consummate the purposes of God, when they too would be raised up in a transformed physicality like that of their risen Lord. Jesus' resurrected body was substantial, not



RESURRECTION IS no metaphor. (istockphotos.cc)

some phantasm like Plato's astral body. He ate and drank, and his body could be touched, even the wounds upon it.

The so-called "spiritual" body of the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:44-45) will differ from the "physical" not so much by its composition as by its animation. In the creation, material bodies came alive by the soul (Genesis 2:7). In the resurrection, material bodies will be fully animated by the Spirit.

The transformed physicality of our resurrected bodies will be required when at the end the heavens and the earth will also be made new. God's ultimate dwelling place will then be in the midst of a redeemed mankind in the earth, not with astral bodies in heaven.

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