



Lecture Contents

Dr. Tom Wright, Bishop of Durham, delivered the lecture “Can a Scientist Believe the Resurrection?” on 15th May 2007 at the Babbage Lecture Theatre, Cambridge. A transcript of the lecture follows.

Brief Biography

Dr. Tom Wright is one of today’s best known and respected New Testament scholars. Born in 1948, he studied for the ministry at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, and was ordained as Junior Research Fellow and Junior Chaplain at Merton College, Oxford.

From 1978 to 1981 he was Fellow and Chaplain at Downing College, Cambridge, and then moved to Montreal as Assistant Professor of New Testament Studies at McGill University. He returned in 1986 to Oxford as University Lecturer in New Testament, and Fellow and Chaplain of Worcester College, Oxford. He became Dean of Lichfield in 1994, and Canon Theologian of Westminster Abbey in 2000. He has been Bishop of Durham since 2003.

Tom has published over 40 books at both scholarly and popular levels; also several dozen academic and popular articles. He also frequently broadcasts on radio and TV, including devising and presenting programmes in both media.

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Introduction

Thank you for your welcome and for the unexpected invitation to deliver this lecture. 'Unexpected', because I don't normally lecture on titles with the word 'science' in them, for a good reason: I make no claim to know anything about science. I did precisely one year of physics and chemistry at school, and, since I knew before I began that I was going to give them up to concentrate on classics, I did as little work as I could without actually entering a penal zone. In fact, my chemistry report in summer 1963 said, 'He has maintained his position' – which I may say was 24th out of 24 – 'with occasional signs of interest now and then.' I did, however, love mathematics, with its elegance and harmonies, and it was the subject I was most sorry to give up after O level; but that's another story.

So a question beginning 'can a scientist . . .' is a dangerous one for me to address. Of course, it is possible to give a short and trivial answer, rather like the man who, when asked whether he believed in infant baptism, replied, 'Sure! I've seen it done!' That, of course, exposes one of the problems with the phrase 'believe in': does it mean 'believe that it *can* be done', or 'believe that it *should* be done'? And there are other possibilities too, as we shall see. Similarly, to the question 'can a scientist believe in the resurrection?' one might simply reply, 'Sure! I've seen it done!' I know plenty of scientists who firmly and avowedly believe in the resurrection, and some indeed who have given a solid and coherent account of why they do so. I salute them but do not intend tonight to engage with the different ways in which they have presented their case. I want, rather, to explore the fault lines, if that's the right expression, between different ways of knowing, particularly between what we may loosely call scientific knowing and historical knowing, and between both of these and those other modes of knowing to which we give, very loosely, the names of faith, hope and love.

And my case, you will not be surprised to learn, is that these ways of knowing do in fact overlap and interlock much more than we usually suppose. Certainly, much more than a certain kind of rhetoric would try to persuade us: it has been a feature of the last two hundred years to invoke a kind of pan-enlightenment thesis, namely that the methods and results of modern science have delivered us from the dark superstitions of the past, sometimes designated 'mediaeval', so that everything that went before, say, 1750, with a few golden exceptions, was ignorance and guesswork and everything since then has been an upward path towards the light. I am sometimes accused of being anti-Enlightenment, and there is a grain of truth in that because I do think that post-modernity has got some important points to make; but I want to assure you that I have no wish to return to pre-Enlightenment dentistry, sanitation or travel, to look no further. I merely note that there are obvious ambiguities as well as obvious massive gains. The movement that gave us penicillin also gave us Hiroshima. Somehow, as most admit

and I suspect all know in their bones, science in the strict sense can never be enough, enough, that is, for a full and flourishing human life in all its dimensions.

But the question then turns on the word 'believe', and here too there are puzzles to explore. Plato, of course, declared that 'belief' was a kind of second-rate 'knowing', more or less half way between knowing and not knowing, so that the objects of 'belief' possessed a kind of intermediate ontology, half way between existence and non-existence. This way of thinking has coloured popular usage, so that when we say 'I believe it's raining' we are cushioning ourselves against the possibility that we might be wrong, whereas when we say 'I know it's raining' we are open to straightforward contradiction. But this usage has slid, over the last centuries, to the point where, with a kind of implicit positivism, we use 'know' and 'knowledge' for things we think we can in some sense prove, and 'believe' and its cognates for things which we perceive as degenerating into mere private opinion without much purchase on the wider world.

And the Christian claim was from the beginning that the question of Jesus' resurrection was a question, not of the internal mental and spiritual states of his followers a few days after his crucifixion, but about something that had happened in the real, public world, leaving not only an empty tomb, but a broken loaf at Emmaus and footprints in the sand by the lake among its physical mementoes, and leaving his followers with a lot of explaining to do but with a transformed worldview which is only explicable on the assumption that something really did happen, even though it stretched their existing worldviews to breaking point. More of that anon. What we now have to do is to examine this early Christian claim more thoroughly, to ask what can be said about it historically, and to enquire, more particularly, what sort of 'knowing' or 'believing' we are talking about when we ask whether 'a scientist' can 'believe' that which, it seems, 'the resurrection' actually refers to.

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Knowing Science, History and Other Things

First, some reflections – unsystematic musings, really – on the types of knowing. I assume that when we ask ‘can a scientist believe’ something we are asking a two-level question. First, we are asking about what sort of things the ‘scientific method’ can explore, and how it can know or believe certain things. Second, we are asking about the kind of commitment someone wedded to scientific knowing is expected to have in all other areas of his or her life. Is a scientist, for example, expected to have a scientific approach to listening to music? To watching a football game? To falling in love? The question assumes, I think, that ‘the resurrection’, and perhaps particularly ‘the resurrection of Jesus’, is something that might be expected to impinge on the scientist’s area of concern, somewhat as if one were to say ‘can a scientist believe that the sun could rise twice in a day?’, or ‘can a scientist believe that a moth could fly to the moon?’. (I did actually watch the sun *set* twice in a day; I took off from Aberdeen on a winter afternoon shortly after sunset, and the sun rose again as we climbed, only then to set, gloriously, a second time shortly afterwards. That was, of course, cheating.) This is different, in other words, from saying, ‘can a scientist believe that Schubert’s music is beautiful?’ or ‘can a scientist believe that her husband loves her?’; and there are those, of course, who by redefining the resurrection to make it simply a spiritual experience in the inner hearts and minds of the disciples, have pulled the question towards the latter pair and away from the former. But that is ruled out by what, as we shall see, all first-century users of the language of resurrection meant by the word. ‘Resurrection’ in the first century meant people who were physically thoroughly dead becoming physically thoroughly alive again, not simply ‘surviving’ or entering a ‘purely spiritual’ world, whatever that might be. And that necessarily impinges on the public world.

But it is the public world, not of the natural scientist, but of the historian. To put it crudely, and again without all the necessary footnotes and nuances, science studies the repeatable, while history studies the unrepeatable. Caesar only crossed the Rubicon once, and if he’d crossed it again it would have meant something different the second time. There was, and could be, only one first landing on the moon. The fall of the second Jerusalem Temple took place in AD 70 and never happened again. Historians don’t of course see this as a problem, and are usually not shy about declaring that these events certainly took place even though we can’t repeat them in the laboratory. But when people say ‘but that can’t have happened, because we know that *that sort of thing* doesn’t actually happen,’ they are appealing to a kind of would-be scientific principle of history, namely the principle of *analogy*. The problem with analogy is that it never quite gets you far enough, precisely because history is full of unlikely things that happened once and once only, so that the analogies are often at best partial, and are dependent anyway on the retort ‘who says?’ to the objection about some kinds of

things not normally happening. And indeed, in the case in point, we should note as an obvious but often overlooked point the fact that the early Christians did *not* think that Jesus' resurrection was one instance of something that happened from time to time elsewhere. Granted, they saw it as the first, advance instance of something that would eventually happen to everyone else, but they didn't employ that future hope as an analogy from which to argue back that it had happened already in this one instance.

So how does the historian work when the evidence points towards things which we do not normally expect? The resurrection is such a prime example of this that it's hard to produce, at this meta-level, analogies for the question. But, sooner or later, questions of worldview begin to loom up in the background, and the question of what kinds of material the historian will allow on stage is inevitably affected by the worldview within which he or she lives. And at that point we are back to the question of the scientist who, faced with the thoroughly repeatable experiment of what happens to dead bodies, what has always, it seems, happened and what seems likely always to go on happening, declares that the evidence is so massive that it is impossible to believe in the resurrection without ceasing to be a scientist altogether.

This is the point at which we must switch tracks and go to the evidence itself. What can be said, within whatever can be called scientific historiography, about the proposition that Jesus of Nazareth was bodily raised from the dead?

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The Surprising Character of Early Christian Hope

I have sketched elsewhere the map of ancient beliefs about life beyond the grave. Ancient paganism contains all kinds of theories, but whenever resurrection is mentioned, the answer is a firm negative: we know that doesn't happen. (This is worth stressing in tonight's context. One sometimes hears it said or implied that prior to the rise of modern science people believed in all kinds of odd things like resurrection but that now, with two hundred years of scientific research on our side, we know that dead people stay dead. This is ridiculous. The evidence, and the conclusion, was massive and massively drawn in the ancient world as it is today.) Ancient Judaism, on the other hand, is rooted in the belief that God is the creator of the world and that God will one day put the world to rights; and this double belief, when worked out and thought through not least in times of persecution and martyrdom, produced by the time of Jesus a majority belief in ultimate bodily resurrection. The early Christian belief in hope beyond death thus belongs demonstrably on the Jewish, not the pagan, map. But the foundation of my argument for what happened at Easter is the reflection that this Jewish hope has undergone remarkable modifications or mutations within early Christianity, which can be plotted consistently right across the first two centuries. And these mutations are so striking, in an area of human experience where societies tend to be very conservative, that they force the historian, not least the would-be scientific historian, to ask, Why did they occur?

The early Christians held firmly, like most of their Jewish contemporaries, to a two-step belief about the future: first, death and whatever lies immediately beyond; second, a new bodily existence in a newly remade world. There is nothing remotely like this in paganism. This belief is as Jewish as you can get. But within this Jewish belief there are seven early Christian mutations, each of which crops up in writers as diverse as Paul and John the Seer, as Luke and Justin Martyr, as Matthew and Irenaeus.

The first modification is that there is virtually no spectrum of belief within early Christianity. The early Christians came from many strands within Judaism and from widely differing backgrounds within paganism, and hence from circles which must have held very different beliefs about life beyond death. But they have all modified that belief to focus on one point on the spectrum. Christianity looks, to this extent, like a variety of Pharisaic Judaism. There is no trace of a Sadducean view, or of that of Philo. For almost all the first two centuries resurrection, in the traditional sense, holds not only centre stage but the whole stage.

This leads to the second mutation. In second-Temple Judaism, resurrection is important but not that important. Lots of lengthy works never mention the question, let alone this answer. It is still difficult to be sure what the Dead Sea Scrolls thought on the topic.

But in early Christianity resurrection has moved from the circumference to the centre. You can't imagine Paul's thought without it. You shouldn't imagine John's thought without it, though some have tried. Take away the stories of Jesus' birth, and all you lose is four chapters of the gospels. Take away the resurrection and you lose the entire New Testament, and most of the second century fathers as well.

The third mutation has to do with what precisely resurrection *means*. In Judaism it is usually left vague as to what sort of a body the resurrected will possess; some see it as a resuscitated but basically identical body, while others think of it as a shining star. But from the start the early Christians believed that the resurrection body, though it would certainly *be* a body in the sense of a physical object, would be a transformed body, a body whose material, created from the old material, would have new properties. That is what Paul means by the 'spiritual body': not a body made out of non-physical spirit, but a physical body animated by the Spirit. And the point about this body is that, whereas the present flesh and blood is corruptible, doomed to decay and die, the new body will be incorruptible. 1 Corinthians 15, one of Paul's longest sustained discussions and the climax of the whole letter, is about the creator god remaking the creation, not abandoning it as Platonists of all sorts, including the gnostics, would have wanted.

The fourth surprising mutation within the early Christian resurrection belief is that 'the resurrection', as an event, has split into two. No first-century Jew, prior to Easter, expected 'the resurrection' to be anything other than a large-scale event happening to all God's people, or perhaps to the entire human race, at the very end. There were, of course, other Jewish movements which held some kind of inaugurated eschatology. But we never find outside Christianity what becomes a central feature within it: the belief that the resurrection itself has happened to one person in the middle of history, anticipating and guaranteeing the final resurrection of his people at the end of history.

I am indebted to Dominic Crossan for highlighting what I now list as the fifth mutation within Jewish resurrection belief. In a public debate in New Orleans in March 2005, Crossan spoke of 'collaborative eschatology'. Because the early Christians believed that 'resurrection' had begun with Jesus and would be completed in the great final resurrection on the last day, they believed also that God had called them to work with him, in the power of the Spirit, to implement the achievement of Jesus and thereby to anticipate the final resurrection, in personal and political life, in mission and holiness. If Jesus, the Messiah, was God's future arriving in person in the present, then those who belonged to Jesus and followed him in the power of his Spirit were charged with transforming the present, as far as they were able, in the light of that future.

The sixth mutation within the Jewish belief is the new metaphorical use of 'resurrection'. I have written about that elsewhere. Basically, in the Old Testament 'resurrection' functions once, famously, as a metaphor for return from exile (Ezekiel 37). In the New Testament that has disappeared, and a new metaphorical use has emerged, with

'resurrection' used in relation to baptism and holiness (Romans 6, Colossians 2—3), though without, importantly, affecting the concrete referent of a future resurrection itself (Romans 8).

The seventh and final mutation from within the Jewish resurrection belief was its association with Messiahship. Nobody in Judaism had expected the Messiah to die, and therefore naturally nobody had imagined the Messiah rising from the dead. This leads us to the remarkable modification not just of resurrection belief but of Messianic belief itself. Where messianic speculations existed (again, by no means all Jewish texts spoke of a Messiah, but the notion became central in early Christianity), the Messiah was supposed to fight God's victorious battle against the wicked pagans; to rebuild or cleanse the Temple; and to bring God's justice to the world. Jesus, it appeared, had done none of these things. No Jew with any idea of how the language of Messiahship worked at the time could have possibly imagined, after his crucifixion, that Jesus of Nazareth was indeed the Lord's anointed. But from very early on, as witnessed by what may be pre-Pauline fragments of early credal belief such as Romans 1.3f., the Christians affirmed that Jesus was indeed the Messiah, precisely because of his resurrection.

We note at this point, as an important aside, how impossible is it to account for the early Christian belief in Jesus as Messiah without the resurrection. We know of several other Jewish movements, messianic movements, prophetic movements, during the one or two centuries either side of Jesus' public career. Routinely they ended with the violent death of the central figure. Members of the movement (always supposing they got away with their own skins) then faced a choice: either give up the struggle, or find a new Messiah. Had the early Christians wanted to go the latter route, they had an obvious candidate: James, the Lord's brother, a great and devout teacher, the central figure in the early Jerusalem church. But nobody ever imagined that James might be the Messiah.

This rules out the revisionist positions on Jesus' resurrection that have been offered by so many writers in recent years. Suppose we go to Rome in AD 70, and there witness the flogging and execution of Simon bar Giora, the supposed king of the Jews, brought back in Titus's triumph. Suppose we imagine a few Jewish revolutionaries, three days or three weeks later.

The first one says, 'You know, I think Simon really was the Messiah – and he still is!'

The others would be puzzled. Of course he isn't; the Romans got him, as they always do. If you want a Messiah, you'd better find another one.

'Ah,' says the first, 'but I believe he's been raised from the dead.'

'What d'you mean?' his friends ask. 'He's dead and buried.'

'Oh no,' replies the first, 'I believe he's been exalted to heaven.'

The others look puzzled. All the righteous martyrs are with God, everybody knows that; their souls are in God's hand; that doesn't mean they've *already* been raised from the dead. Anyway, the resurrection will happen to us all at the end of time, not to one person in the middle of continuing history.

'No,' replies the first, 'you don't understand. I've had a strong sense of God's love surrounding me. I have felt God forgiving me – forgiving us all. I've had my heart strangely warmed. What's more, last night, I saw Simon; he was there with me...'

The others interrupt, now angry. We can all have visions. Plenty of people dream about recently dead friends. Sometimes it's very vivid. That doesn't mean they've been raised from the dead. It certainly doesn't mean that one of them is the Messiah. And if your heart has been warmed, then sing a Psalm, don't make wild claims about Simon.

That is what they would have said to anyone offering the kind of statement which, according to the revisionists, someone must have come up with as the beginning of the idea of Jesus' resurrection. But this solution isn't just incredible; it's impossible. Had anyone said what the revisionists suggest, some such conversation as the above would have ensued. A little bit of disciplined historical imagination is all it takes to blow away enormous piles of so-called historical criticism.

What is more – to round off this final mutation from within the Jewish belief – because of the early Christian belief in Jesus as Messiah, we find the development of the very early belief that Jesus is Lord and that therefore Caesar is not. This is a whole other topic for another occasion. Death is the last weapon of the tyrant; and the point of the resurrection, despite much misunderstanding, is that death has been defeated.

We have thus noted seven major mutations within the Jewish resurrection belief, each of which became central within early Christianity. The belief in resurrection remains emphatically on the map of first-century Judaism rather than paganism; but, from within the Jewish theology of monotheism, election and eschatology, it has opened up a whole new way of seeing history, hope and hermeneutics. *And this demands a historical explanation.* Why did the early Christians modify the Jewish resurrection-language in these seven ways, and do it with such consistency? When we ask them, they reply that they have done it because of what they believe happened to Jesus on the third day after he died. This forces us to ask: what then must we say about the very strange stories which they tell about that first day?

4

The Stories of Easter

When we plunge in to the stories of the first Easter Day – the accounts we find in the closing chapters of the four canonical gospels – we find that, notoriously, the accounts do not fit snugly together. How many women went to the tomb, and how many angels or men did they meet there? Did the disciples meet Jesus in Jerusalem or Galilee or both? And so on. At this point I am fond of invoking the splendid story of what happened in October 1946 when Karl Popper gave a paper at Wittgenstein's seminar in King's, as written up in that recent book *Wittgenstein's Poker*. Several highly intelligent men – men who would modestly have agreed that they were among the most intelligent men in the world at the time – were in the room as Wittgenstein brandished a poker about and then left abruptly, but none of them could quite agree afterwards as to what precisely had happened. But, as with Cambridge in 1946, so with Jerusalem in AD 30 (or whenever it was): surface discrepancies do not mean that nothing happened. Indeed, they are a reasonable indication that something remarkable happened.

As part of the larger argument that I have advanced elsewhere, I here draw attention to four strange features shared by the accounts in the four canonical gospels. These features, I suggest, compel us to take them seriously as very early accounts, not, as is often suggested, later inventions.

First, we note the strange silence of the Bible in the stories. Up to this point, all four evangelists have drawn heavily upon biblical quotation, allusion and echo. But the resurrection narratives are almost entirely innocent of them. This is the more remarkable, in that from as early as Paul the common credal formula declared that the resurrection, too, was 'according to the scriptures', and Paul and the others ransack psalms and prophets to find texts that will explain what has just happened and set it within, and as the climax to, the long story of God and Israel. Why do the gospel resurrection narratives not do the same?

We could say, of course, that whoever wrote the stories in the form we now have them had gone through, cunningly, and taken material out *to make them look as if they were very old*, rather like someone deliberately taking all the electric fittings out of a house to make it look like it might have done a century or more ago. That might be marginally plausible if we had just one account, or if the four accounts were obviously derived from one another. We don't, and they aren't. You either have to imagine four very different writers each deciding to write up an Easter narrative based on the theology of the early church but with the biblical echoes taken out; or you have to say, which is infinitely more probable, that the stories, even though written down a lot later, go back to extremely early oral tradition which had been formed, and set firmly in the memory of different storytellers, before there had been any time for biblical reflection.

The second strange feature of the stories is better known: the presence of the women as the principal witnesses. Whether we like it or not, women were not regarded as credible witnesses within the ancient world. Nobody would have made them up. Had the tradition started in the male-only form we find in 1 Corinthians 15, it would never have developed, in such different ways as well, into the female-first stories we find in the gospels. The gospels must embody the earliest storytelling, and 1 Corinthians 15 a later revision.

The third strange feature is the portrait of Jesus himself. If, as many revisionists have tried to make out, the gospel stories developed either from people mulling over the scriptures following Jesus' death or a new experience of inner illumination, you would expect to find the risen Jesus shining like a star. That's what Daniel says will happen. We have such a story in the Transfiguration. But none of the gospels say this about Jesus at Easter. Indeed, he appears as a human being with a body that in some ways is quite normal, and can be mistaken for a gardener, or a fellow traveller on the road. Yet the stories also contain mysterious but definite signs that this body has been transformed. It is clearly physical, using up (so to speak) the matter of the crucified body; hence the empty tomb. But, equally, it comes and goes through locked doors; it is not always recognised; and in the end it disappears into God's space, i.e. 'heaven', through the thin curtain which in much Jewish thought separates God's space from human space. This kind of account is without precedent, biblical or otherwise, and it looks as if the writers knew it. And this rules out the old idea that Luke's and John's accounts, which are the most apparently 'physical', were written late in the first century in an attempt to combat docetism (the view that Jesus wasn't a real human being but only 'seemed' to be so). If Luke and John were combatting docetism, they would never have said that the risen Jesus appeared and disappeared through locked doors, sometimes being recognised, sometimes not, and finally ascended into heaven.

The fourth strange feature of the resurrection accounts is the entire absence of mention of the future Christian hope. Almost everywhere else in the New Testament, the resurrection of Jesus is spoken of in connection with the final hope that those who belong to Jesus will one day be raised as he has been, and with the note that this must be anticipated in the present in baptism and behaviour. Insofar as the event is interpreted, it has a very this-worldly, present-age meaning: Jesus is raised, so he is the Messiah, the world's true Lord; we therefore have a job to do, to act as his heralds to the entire world. Once again, had the stories been invented towards the end of the first century this interpretation would certainly have included a mention of the final resurrection of all God's people.

What do we conclude from all this? That the stories, though lightly edited and written down later, are basically very, very early. They are not, as has so often been suggested, legends written up much later to give a pseudo-historical basis for what had been essentially a private experience. And when we ask how such stories could have come

into existence, the obvious answer all the early Christians give is that, though it was hard to describe at the time and remains mind-boggling thereafter, something like this is what happened. And it is now time to ask, at last: what can the historian today say about all this? And, then, what can the scientist say about it?

5

Easter and History

The only way we can explain the phenomena we have been examining is by proposing a two-pronged hypothesis: first, Jesus' tomb really was empty; second, the disciples really did encounter him in ways which convinced them that he was not simply a ghost or hallucination. A brief word about each.

For the disciples to see, or think they saw, someone they took to be Jesus would not by itself have generated the stories we have. Everyone in the ancient world (like many today) knew that people sometimes had strange experiences involving encounters with the dead, particularly the recently dead. However many such visions they had had, they wouldn't have said Jesus was raised from the dead; they weren't expecting such a resurrection. In any case, Jesus' burial was a standard primary burial which would require a secondary burial in an ossuary at some later point. Someone would have had to go and collect Jesus' bones, fold them up, and store them. Nobody in the Jewish world would have spoken of such a person being already raised from the dead. Without the empty tomb, they would have been as quick to say 'hallucination' as we would.

Equally, an empty tomb by itself proves almost nothing. It might (as many have suggested) have been the wrong one, though a quick check would have sorted that one out. The soldiers, the gardeners, the chief priests, other disciples or someone else might have taken away the body. That was the conclusion Mary drew in John's gospel, and the story the Jewish leaders put about in Matthew's. Unless the finding of the empty tomb had been accompanied by sightings of, and meetings with, the risen Jesus, that is the kind of conclusion they would all have drawn. The meetings on the one hand, and the empty tomb on the other, are each therefore necessary if we are to explain the rise of the belief, and the writing of the stories as we have them. Neither by itself would be sufficient; put them together, though, and they provide a complete and coherent explanation for the early Christian belief.

All this brings us face to face with the ultimate question. The empty tomb and the meetings with Jesus are, in combination, the only possible explanation for the stories and beliefs that grew up so quickly among his followers. How, in turn, do we explain *them*? What can the historian say? What can the scientist say?

In any other historical enquiry, the answer would be so obvious that it would hardly need saying: the best explanation is that it happened that way. Here, of course, it is so shocking, so earth-shattering, that we rightly pause before leaping into the unknown. And here, indeed, as some sceptical friends have cheerfully pointed out to me, it is always possible for anyone to follow the argument so far and to say, simply, 'I don't have a good explanation for what happened to cause the empty tomb and the appearances,

but I choose to maintain my belief that dead people don't rise and therefore conclude that something else must have happened even though we can't tell what it was.' That is fine; I respect that position; but I simply note that it is indeed then a matter of choice, not a matter of saying that something called 'scientific historiography' itself forces us to take that route.

But at this moment in the argument all the signposts are pointing in one direction. I have examined elsewhere all the alternative explanations, ancient and modern, for the rise of the early church, and I have to say that far and away the best historical explanation is that Jesus of Nazareth, having been thoroughly dead and buried, really was raised to life on the third day with a new *kind* of physical body which left an empty tomb behind it because it had 'used up' the material of Jesus' original body, and which possessed new properties which nobody had expected or imagined but which generated significant mutations in the thinking of those who encountered it. If something like this happened, it would perfectly explain why Christianity began and why it took the shape it did.

But this is where I want to heed carefully the warnings of those theologians who have cautioned against any attempt to stand on the ground of rationalism and to attempt to 'prove', in some mathematical fashion, something which, if it happened, ought itself to be regarded as the centre not only of history but also of epistemology, not only of *what* we know but of *how* we know it. This is where the third element in knowing, the puzzling bits beyond science or history but still interacting with both, inevitably come into play. I once imagined, to make this point, a fantasy Oxbridge scenario: a rich old member gives to a College a wonderful, glorious painting which simply won't fit any of the spaces available in College, and which is so magnificent that eventually the College decides to pull itself down and rebuild itself around this great and unexpected gift, discovering as it does so that all the best things about the College the way it was are thereby enhanced within the new structure, and all the problems of which people had been aware are thereby dealt with. And the key thing about that illustration, inadequate though it is, is that there must be some point at which the painting is received by the existing college, some epistemological overlap-point to enable the college officers to make their momentous decision. The donor doesn't just come along, blow up the college unasked, present the painting, and then say 'now figure out what to do'. My point is that the resurrection of Jesus, presenting itself as the obvious answer to the question of 'how do you explain the rise of early Christianity?', has that kind of purchase on serious historical enquiry, and therefore poses that kind of challenge to the larger world-view of both the historian and the scientist.

The challenge is in fact the challenge of *new creation*. To put it at its most basic: the resurrection of Jesus offers itself, to the student of history or science no less than the Christian or the theologian, not as a very odd event within the world as it is, but the utterly characteristic, prototypical and foundational event within the world as it has begun

to be. It is not an absurd event within the old world, but the symbol and starting-point of the new world. The claim advanced in Christianity is of that magnitude: that with Jesus of Nazareth there is not simply a new religious possibility, not simply a new ethic or a new way of salvation, but a new creation.

Now that might seem to be an epistemological, as well as a theological, pre-emptive strike. If there really is a new creation on the loose, the historian wouldn't have any analogies for it, and the scientist wouldn't be able to rank its characteristic events with other events that might otherwise have been open to inspection. What are we to do? No other explanations have been offered, in two thousand years of sneering scepticism against the Christian witness, that can satisfactorily account for how the tomb came to be empty, how the disciples came to see Jesus, and how their lives and worldviews were transformed. But history alone, certainly as conceived within the modern western world, and placed on the Procrustean bed of the science which (rightly) observes the world as it is, appears to leave us like the children of Israel shivering on the sea shore. It can press the question to which Christian faith is the obvious answer. But if someone chooses to stay between the Pharaoh of scepticism and the deep sea of faith, history itself cannot force them further.

Everything then depends on the context within which the history is done. The most important decisions we make in life are not taken by post-enlightenment left-brain rationality alone. I would not suggest that one can argue right up to the central truth of Christian faith by pure human reason building on simple observation of the world. Indeed, it should be obvious that one cannot. Equally, I would not suggest that historical investigation of this sort has therefore no part to play, and that all that is required is a leap of blind faith. God has given us minds to think; the question has been appropriately raised; Christianity appeals to history, and to history it must go. And the question of Jesus' resurrection, though it may in some senses burst the boundaries of history, also remains within them; that is precisely why it is so important, so disturbing, so life- and-death. We could cope – the world could cope – with a Jesus who ultimately remains a wonderful idea inside his disciples' minds and hearts. The world cannot cope with a Jesus who comes out of the tomb, who inaugurates God's new creation right within the middle of the old one.

That is why, for a complete approach to the question, we need to locate our study of history within a larger complex of human, personal and corporate, contexts, and this of course forms a challenge not only to the historian, not only to the scientist, but to all humans in whatever worldview they habitually live. The story of Thomas in John 20 will serve as a parable for all of this. Thomas, like a good historian, wants to see and touch. Jesus presents himself to his sight, and invites him to touch; but Thomas doesn't. He transcends the type of knowing he had intended to use, and passes into a higher and richer one. Suddenly the new, giddy possibility appears before him: a new creation. Thomas takes a deep breath, and brings history and faith together in a rush. 'My Lord,'

he says, 'and my God.' That is not an anti-historical statement, since the 'lord' in question is precisely the one who is the climax of Israel's history and the launch of a new history, and since once you grasp the resurrection you see that Israel's history is full of partial and preparatory analogies for this moment, so that the epistemological weight is borne not by the promise of ultimate resurrection and new creation alone but by the narrative of God's mighty actions in the past. Nor is it an anti-scientific statement, since the world of new creation is precisely the world of new *creation* and as such open to, and indeed eager for, the work of human beings not to manipulate it with magic tricks, nor to be subservient to it as though the world of creation were itself divine, but to be its stewards; and stewards need to pay close, minute attention to that of which they are stewards, in order the better to serve it and to enable it to attain its intended fruitfulness. What I am suggesting is that faith in Jesus risen from the dead *transcends but includes* what we call history and what we call science. Faith of this sort is not blind belief which rejects all history and science. Nor is it simply – which would be much 'safer!' – a belief which simply inhabits a totally different sphere, discontinuous from either, in a separate watertight compartment. Rather, this kind of faith, which is in fact like all modes of knowledge defined by the nature of its object, is faith in the creator God, the God who has promised to put all things to rights at the last, the God who (as the sharp point where those two come together) has raised Jesus from the dead *within* history, leaving as I said evidence which demands an explanation from the scientist as well as anybody else. Insofar as I understand scientific method, when something turns up which doesn't fit the paradigm you're working with, one option at least, perhaps when all others have failed, is to change the paradigm, not to exclude everything you've known to that point but to include it within a larger whole. That is, if you like, the Thomas challenge.

If Thomas represents an epistemology of faith, which transcends but also includes historical and scientific knowing, we might suggest that Paul represents at this point an epistemology of hope. In 1 Corinthians 15 he sketches his argument that there will be a future resurrection, as part of God's new creation, the redemption of the entire cosmos as in Romans 8. Hope, for the Christian, is not wishful thinking or mere blind optimism. It is a mode of knowing, a mode within which new things are possible, options are not shut down, new creation can happen. There is more to be said about this, but not here.

I want, rather, to finish with Peter. Epistemologies of faith and hope, both transcending but including historical and scientific knowing, point on to an epistemology of love – an idea I first met in Bernard Lonergan, but which was hardly new with him. The story of John 21 sharpens it up. Peter, famously, has denied Jesus. He has chosen to live within the normal world, where the tyrants win in the end, and where it's better to dissociate yourself from people who get on the wrong side of them. But now, with Easter, Peter is called to live in a new and different world; where Thomas is called to a new kind of faith, and Paul to a radically renewed hope, Peter is called to a new kind of love. Here I go back to Wittgenstein once more, not this time for a poker but for a

famous and haunting aphorism: 'It is *love* that believes the resurrection.' 'Simon, son of John,' says Jesus, 'do you love me?' There is a whole world in that question, a world of personal invitation and challenge, of the remaking of a human being after disloyalty and disaster, of the refashioning of epistemology itself, the question of how we know things, to correspond to the new ontology, the question of what God's new world is like. The reality which is the resurrection cannot simply be 'known' from within the old world of decay and denial, of tyrants and torture, of disobedience and death. But that's the point. As I said, the resurrection is not, as it were, a highly peculiar event within the *present* world, though it is that as well; it is the defining, central, prototypical event of the *new* creation, the world which is being born with Jesus. If we are even to glimpse this new world, let alone enter it, we will need a different kind of knowing, a knowing which involves us in new ways, an epistemology which draws out from us not just the cool appraisal of detached quasi-scientific research, but the whole-person engagement and involvement for which the best shorthand is 'love', in the full Johannine sense of *agape**. My sense from talking to some scientific colleagues is that, though it's hard to describe, something like this is already at work when the scientist devotes him- or herself to the subject-matter so that the birth of new hypotheses seems to come about, not so much through an abstract brain (a computer made of meat?) crunching data from elsewhere, but more of a soft and mysterious symbiosis of knower and known, of lover and beloved.

The sceptic will quickly suggest that this is, after all, a way of collapsing the truth of Easter once more into mere subjectivism. Not so. Just because it takes *agape** to believe the resurrection, that doesn't mean that all that happened was that Peter and the others felt their hearts strangely warmed. Precisely because it is *love* we are talking about, not lust, it must have a correlative reality in the world outside the lover. Love is the deepest mode of knowing, because it is love that, while completely engaging with reality other than itself, affirms and celebrates that other-than-self reality. This is the mode of knowing which is necessary if we are to live in the new public world, the world launched at Easter, the world in which Jesus is Lord and Caesar isn't.

That is why, although the historical arguments for Jesus' bodily resurrection are truly strong, we must never suppose that they will do more than bring people to the questions faced by Thomas and Peter, the questions of faith and love. We cannot use an supposedly 'objective' historical epistemology as the ultimate ground for the truth of Easter. To do so would be like someone who lit a candle to see whether the sun had risen. What the candles of historical scholarship will do is to show that the room has been disturbed, that it doesn't look like it did last night, and that would-be 'normal' explanations for this won't do. Maybe, we think after the historical arguments have done their work, maybe morning has come and the world has woken up. But to find out whether this is so we must take the risk and open the curtains to the rising sun. When we do so, we won't rely on the candles any more, not because we don't believe in evidence and argument, not because we don't believe in history or science, but because

they will have been overtaken by the larger reality from which they borrow, to which they point, and in which they will find a new and larger home. All knowing is a gift from God, historical and scientific knowing no less than that of faith, hope and love; but the greatest of these is love.