

Searching for Resurrection

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A Christian View

In the Gospel of Matthew it says that at the first light on the first day of the week, Mary of Magdala and the other Mary came to inspect Jesus's tomb. They found there a messenger of God dressed in white. The messenger said to the women, "Don't be frightened! I know you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here! You see he was raised, just as he said. Come look at the spot where he was lying. And run, tell his disciples that he has raised from the dead."

This is a story about resurrection from death. For millions of people it is proof that our souls live after we die. I like the idea, the idea of resurrection. However, I find the evidence shaky. The New Testament has four different versions, all of them written decades after the events they describe. So over the years I have searched for reliable proof of the resurrection of human beings.

Talking to the Other Side

I have found that most claims of resurrection do not hold up under careful examination. For example a linguistics professor at the University of Pittsburgh has analyzed audiotapes of more than a dozen channelers, who claim they can talk to the other side. Linguistically, she says, most spirits put on a pretty weak act. First, they speak in English, presumably because it would be hard to get the message across if they spoke in the language of the time and place they claim to be from. Some speak in the dialect of the channeler, and often they are inconsistent in accent. On one tape, for example, the "non-American accent slipped as the channeler became progressively more excited."

Groucho Marx was once persuaded by his friends to visit a medium who had become popular among his Hollywood friends. The group sat together around a table holding hands in dim light. After a few moments the medium said in a strange voice, "You may ask the spirit any question, any question." Groucho asked, "What's the capital of South Dakota?" The medium did not know. Groucho was told to leave because he was creating negative vibrations.

Near-Death Experience

Stories of "seeing the light," which first became popular in the mid-1970s are also now a Hollywood cliché. Even in the Disney movie "Finding Nemo" the cartoon fish are drawn out of the darkness toward a bright light. Reports of such experiences are not new. A founder of Universalism, George DeBenneville, based his belief in universal salvation on an experience that he went through when he was 38 years old. The year was 1741. DeBenneville recorded that he was sick from a consumptive disorder. He wrote:

I felt myself die by degrees, and exactly at midnight I was separated from my body and saw the people occupied in watching it according to the custom of the country. I had a great desire to be freed from the sight of my body, and immediately I was drawn up as in a cloud and beheld great

wonders where I passed, impossible to be written or expressed. I quickly came to a place which appeared to my eyes as a level plain, so extensive that my sight was not able to reach its limits, filled with all sorts of delightful fruit trees, agreeable to behold, and which sent forth such fragrant odors that all the air was filled as with incense. In this place I found that I had two guardians, one at my right hand and the other at my left, exceedingly beautiful beyond expression, whose boundless friendship and love seemed to penetrate through all my inward parts . . . Then my guardian took me up and reconducted me to the house from whence I came, where I perceived the people assembled. And discovering my body in the coffin, I was reunited with the same and found myself lodged within my earthly tabernacle.

After this experience George DeBenneville dedicated his life to traveling in America preaching that God was loving and forgiving, that there was no hell, and that all people would go to heaven when they died. This came to be known as “the gospel of universal salvation,” and the people who taught it were called “Universalists.” Although, he started no churches, George DeBenneville laid the foundation for the establishment of Universalism in America.

Today neuroscientists report that our brain has an area that, when stimulated with an electric probe, can produce the feeling that we are of leaving our body. Some believe this is proof that all such experiences are biological. Others argue that this is evidence that our brains are equipped with the ability to help our soul establish a connection with a source of energy outside of our bodies.

Reincarnation

Yet another approach to resurrection is reincarnation. About 18% of Americans now say that people are reincarnated and a book called *Your Love Life and Reincarnation: Why The Past Is Affecting Your Present and How To Fix It* is on the market right now. Still most of us dismiss as fantasy or wish fulfillment the recollections of people who “remember” being Aristotle, Alexander the Great, or a Joan of Ark.

I have found, however, serious research on reincarnation. Dr. Ian Stevenson, Professor of Psychiatry and Director of Personality Studies at the Health Sciences Center of the University of Virginia, has spend 40 years studying over 2500 alleged cases of reincarnation. Dr. Stevenson says his research suggests the possibility of reincarnation, but it does not prove it. He has talked to children who remember concrete details about dead strangers whose experiences can be documented. For example he has interviewed a young boy who insisted that he is really an auto mechanic who died in a car crash a few years before. He took another child to a home he said he lived in before he died and was reborn. The child asked the mother in the house if she had finished knitting the sweater she was making for him when he died. A *Washington Post* reporter who investigated Dr. Stevenson, concluded not that reincarnation is true but that the world is a mysterious place and that we are all connected by forces beyond our understanding.

String Theory

While some neuroscientists are studying our brains and a psychiatrist is studying reports of past lives, particle physicists are proposing that our universe has ten dimensions. In 1919, a Polish mathematician proposed that the existence of a fourth spatial dimension might allow the linking of general relativity and electromagnetic theory. It turned out to be incorrect. A few years later two mathematicians, one from the University of Pennsylvania and one from Harvard University, described six-dimensional geometrical shapes. Now some particle physicists say for the equations that describe superstring theory to begin to work out they need to make use of additional dimensions. The mathematics used in superstring theory requires at least 11 dimensions.

I, of course, wonder if the idea of 11 dimensions might have something to do with the ancient religious beliefs in heaven, or whether these 11 dimensions might have something to do with the new studies of out of body experiences or reincarnation.

We live in interesting times. A neuroscientist studies our brains to better understand reports of out of body experiences. A psychiatrist studies reports of past lives in children. A particle physicist proposes that the universe is made up of 11 dimensions. None of it proves that we are resurrected, but I find it all interesting.

I do have a personal theory. Although I do not have certain knowledge, I do have suspect that some part of us, our mind, our soul, our spirit, continues. When I am asked “Is immortality in the sense of a continued personal existence of the individual after death part of your belief system?” I answer yes. My best guess is that there is a part of us that is resurrected.

But my faith in resurrection is not proof. After I have given all the explanations which my study and thought can offer, there remains a core of mystery. Sometimes we must wait to find the complete truth.

A Humanist View

Still this morning I am sure that at least one form of resurrection does exist. I am certain that our actions spread out into the future like ripples in a pond.

It is not just the famous people whose lives live on in history. All of us live on in the things we do when we are alive. One of you sent me a wonderful quote from James Thurber who said, “The sound of a great name dies like an echo; the splendor of fame fades into nothing; but the grace of a fine spirit pervades the places through which it has passed.”

Our lives are a powerful force. Each of us lives on the creative activities we do that contribute to the progress of the human race. All of our lives have meaning because each of us has contributed to the growth and development of the human race. Every life has a purpose. Each of us is important, our contributions are significant and they will last. Just as we stand on the shoulders of those who came before us, those who will come after us will stand on our shoulders. We are each resurrected in that we are part of what has come before and we are part of what will come after us. Of this I am certain.

In the spring, at Easter, people all over the world gather to—in one way or another—celebrate the victory of life over death, to express their affection for life, their yearning for more and ever more of it. So it is with us here and now.

Today in the spring, we see again the miracle of new growth, of buds and of flowers coming forth out of land that was only a short time ago frozen, covered with ice and snow. Death is conquered. We feel joy at the sounds of birds, smells of the fresh growth, and the bright colors of flowers. Feeling thankful for all those who came before us, let us turn our attention to the adventure of life on earth.