**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**MATTHEW-087**. **THE GRAVE OF THE DEAD JOHN AND THE GRAVE OF THE LIVING JESUS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"And John's disciples came, and took up the body, and buried it, and went and told Jesus."*

*Matthew 14:12*

*"And they departed quickly from the sepulchre with fear and great joy."*

*Matthew 28:8*

There is a remarkable parallel and still more remarkable contrast between these two groups of disciples at the graves of their respective masters. John the Baptist's followers venture into the very jaws of the lion to rescue the headless corpse of their martyred teacher from a prison grave. They bear it away and lay it reverently in its unknown sepulchre, and when they have done these last offices of love they feel that all is over. They have no longer a centre, and they disintegrate. There was nothing to hold them together any more. The shepherd had been smitten, and the flock were scattered. As a schoolor a distinct community they cease to be, and are mostly absorbed into the ranks of Christ's followers. That sorrowful little company that turned from John's grave, perhaps amidst the grim rocks of Moab, perhaps in his native city amongst the hills of Judah, parted then, to meet no more, and to bear away only a common sorrow that time would comfort, and a common memory that time would dim.

The other group laid their martyred Master in His grave with as tender hands and as little hope as did John's disciples. The bond that held them together was gone too, and the disintegrating process began at once. We see them breaking up into little knots, and soon they, too, will be scattered. The women come to the grave to perform the woman's office of anointing, and they are left to go alone. Other slight hints are given which show how much the ties of companionship had been relaxed, even in a day, and how certainly and quickly they would have fallen asunder. But all at once a new element comes in, all is changed. The earliest visitors to the sepulchre leave it, not with the lingering sorrow of those who have no more that they can do, but with the quick, buoyant step of people charged with great and glad tidings. They come to it wrapped in grief--they leave it with great joy. They come to it, feeling that all was over, and that their union with the rest who had loved Him was little more than a remembrance. They go away, feeling that they are all bound together more closely than ever.

The grave of John was the end of a school. The grave of Jesus was the beginning of a Church. Why? The only answer is the message which the women brought back from the empty sepulchre on that Easter day: The Lord is risen. The whole history of the Christian Church, and even its very existence, is unintelligible, except on the supposition of the resurrection. But for that, the fate of John's disciples would have been the fate of Christ's--they would have melted away into the mass of the nation, and at most there would have been one more petty Galilean sect that would have lived on for a generation and died out when the last of His companions died. So from these two contrasted groups we may fairly gather some thoughts as to the Resurrection of Christ, as attested by the very existence of a Christian Church, and as to the joy of that resurrection.

**I. Now the first point to be considered is, that the conduct of Christ's disciples after His death was exactly the opposite of what might have been expected.**

They held together. The natural thing for them to do would have been to disband; for their one bond was gone; and if they had acted according to the ordinary laws of human conduct, they would have said to themselves, Let us go back to our fishing-boats and our tax-gathering, and seek safety in separation, and nurse our sorrow apart. A few lingering days might have been given to weep together at His grave, and to assuage the first bitterness of grief and disappointment; but when these were over, nothing could have prevented Christianity and the Church from being buried in the same sepulchre as Jesus. As certainly as the stopping up of the fountain would empty the river's bed, so surely would Christ's death have scattered His disciples. And that strange fact, that it did not scatter them, needs to be looked well into and fairly accounted for in some plausible manner. The end of John's school gives a parallel which brings the singularity of the fact into stronger relief; and looking at these two groups as they stand before us in these two texts, the question is irresistibly suggested, Why did not the one fall away into its separate elements, as the other did? The keystone of the arch was in both cases withdrawn--why did the one structure topple into ruin while the other stood firm?

Not only did the disciples of Christ keep united, but their conceptions of Jesus underwent a remarkable change, after His death. We might have expected, indeed, that, when memory began to work, and the disturbing influence of daily association was withdrawn, the same idealising process would have begun on their image of Him, which reveals and ennobles the characters of our dear ones who have gone away from us. Most men have to die before their true worth is discerned. But no process of that sort will suffice to account for the change and heightening of the disciplesthoughts about their dead Lord. It was not merely that, when they remembered, they said, Did not our hearts burn within us by the way while He talked with us?--but that His death wrought exactly the opposite effect from what it might have been expected to do. It ought to have ended their hope that He was the Messiah, and we know that within forty-eight hours it was beginning to do so, as we learn from the plaintive words of disappointed and fading hope: We trusted that it had been He which should have redeemed Israel. If, so early, the cold conviction was stealing over their hearts that their dearest expectation was proved by His death to have been a dream, what could have prevented its entire dominion over them, as the days grew into months and years? But somehow or other that process was arrested, and the opposite one set in. The death that should have shattered Messianic dreams confirmed them. The death that should have cast a deeper shadow of incomprehensibleness over His strange and lofty claims poured a new light upon them, which made them all plain and clear. The very parts of His teaching which His death would have made those who loved Him wish to forget, became the centre of His followersfaith. His cross became His throne. Whilst He lived with them they knew not what He said in His deepest words, but, by a strange paradox, His death convinced them that He was the Son of God, and that that which they had seen with their eyes, and their hands had handled, was the Eternal Life. The cross alone could never have done that. Something else there must have been, if the men were sane, to account for this paradox.

Nor is this all. Another equally unlikely sequel of the death of Jesus is the unmistakable moral transformation effected on the disciples. Timorous and tremulous before, something or other touched them into altogether new boldness and self-possession. Dependent on His presence before, and helpless when He was away from them for an hour, they become all at once strong and calm; they stand before the fury of a Jewish mob and the threatenings of the Sanhedrim, unmoved and victorious. And these brave confessors and saintly heroes are the men who, a few weeks before, had been petulant, self-willed, jealous, cowardly. What had lifted them suddenly so far above themselves? Their Master's death? That would more naturally have taken any heart or courage out of them, and left them indeed as sheep in the midst of wolves. Why, then, do they thus strangely blaze up into grandeur and heroism? Can any reasonable account be given of these paradoxes? Surely it is not too much to ask of people who profess to explain Christianity on naturalistic principles, that they shall make the process clear to us by which, Christ being dead and buried, His disciples were kept together, learned to think more loftily of Him, and sprang at once to a new grandeur of character. Why did not they do as John's disciples did, and disappear? Why was not the stream lost in the sand, when the head-waters were cut off?

**II. Notice then, next, that the disciples immediate belief in the Resurrection furnishes a reasonable, and the only reasonable, explanation of the facts.**

There is no better historical evidence of a fact than the existence of an institution built upon it, and coeval with it. The Christian Church is such evidence for the fact of the Resurrection; or, to put the conclusion in the most moderate fashion, for the belief in the Resurrection. For, as we have shown, the natural effect of our Lord's death would have been to shatter the whole fabric: and if that effect were not produced, the only reasonable account of the force that hindered it is, that His followers believed that He rose again. Since that was their faith, one can understand how they were banded more closely together than ever. One can understand how their eyes were opened to know Him who was declared to be the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead. One can understand how, in the enthusiasm of these new thoughts of their Lord, and in the strength of His victory over death, they put aside their old fears and littlenesses and clothed themselves in armour of light. The Lord is risen indeedwas the belief which made the continuous existence of the Church possible. Any other explanation of that great outstanding fact is lame and hopelessly insufficient.

We know that that belief was the belief of the early Church. Even if one waived all reference to the Gospels, we have the means of demonstrating that in Paul's undisputed epistles. Nobody has questioned that he wrote the First Epistle to the Corinthians. The date most generally assumed to that letter brings it within about five-and-twenty years of the crucifixion. In that letter, in addition to a multitude of incidental references to the Lord as risen, we have the great passage in the fifteenth chapter, where the apostle not only declares that the Resurrection was one of the two facts which made his gospel, but solemnly enumerates the witnesses of the risen Lord, and alleges that this gospel of the Resurrection was common to him and to all the Church. He tells us of Christ's appearance to himself at his conversion, which must have taken place within six or seven years of the crucifixion, and assures us that at that early period he found the whole Church believing and preaching Christ's resurrection. Their belief rested on their alleged intercourse with Him a few days after His death, and it is inconceivable that within so short a period such a belief should have sprung up and been universally received, if it had not begun when and as they said that it did.

But we are not left even to inferences of this kind to show that, from the beginning, the Church witnessed to the Resurrection of Jesus. Its own existence is the great witness to its faith. And it is important to observe that, even if we had not the documentary evidence of the Pauline epistles as the earliest records, of the Gospels, and of the Acts of the Apostles, we should still have sufficient proof that the belief in the Resurrection is as old as the Church. For the continuance of the Church cannot be explained without it. If that faith had not dawned on their slow, sad hearts on that Easter morning, a few weeks would have seen them scattered; and if once they had been scattered, as they inevitably would have been, no power could have reunited them, any more than a diamond once shattered can be pieced together again. There would have been no motive and no actors to frame a story of resurrection, when once the little company had melted away. The existence of the Church depended on their belief that the Lord was risen. In the nature of the case that belief must have followed immediately on His death. It, and it only, reasonably accounts for the facts. And so, over and above Apostles, and Gospels, and Epistles, the Church is the great witness, by its very being, to its own immediate and continuous belief in the Resurrection of our Lord.

**III. Again, we may remark that such a belief could not have originated or maintained itself unless it had been true.**

Our previous remarks have gone no farther than to establish the belief in the Resurrection of Christ, as the basis of primitive Christianity. It is vehemently alleged, and we may freely admit that the step is a long one from subjective belief to objective reality. But still it is surely perfectly fair to argue that a given belief is of such a nature that it cannot be supposed to rest on anything less solid than a fact; and this is eminently the case in regard to the belief in Christ's Resurrection. There have been many attempts on the part of those who reject that belief to account for its existence, and each of them in succession has had its day, and ceased to be. Unbelief devours its own children remorselessly, and the succession to the throne of antichristian scepticism is won, as in some barbarous tribes, by slaying the reigning sovereign. The armies of the aliens turn their weapons against one another, and each new assailant of the historical veracity of the Gospels commences operations by showing that all previous assailants have been wrong, and that none of their explanations will hold water.

For instance, we hear nothing now of the coarse old explanation that the story of the Resurrection was a lie, and became current through the conscious imposture of the leaders of the Church. And it was high time that such a solution should be laid aside. Who, with half an eye for character, could study the deeds and the writings of the apostles, and not feel that, whatever else they were, they were profoundly honest, and as convinced as of their own existence, that they had seen Christ alive after His passion, by many infallible proofs? If Paul and Peter and John were conspirators in a trick, then their lives and their words were the most astounding anomaly. Who, either, that had the faintest perception of the forces that sway opinion and frame systems, could believe that the fair fabric of Christian morality was built on the sand of a lie, and cemented by the slime of deceit bubbling up from the very pit of hell? Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? That insolent hypothesis has had its day.

Then when it was discredited, we were told that the mythical tendency would explain everything. It showed us how good men could tell lies without knowing it, and how the religious value of an alleged fact in an alleged historical revelation did not in the least depend on its being a fact. And that great discovery, which first converted solid historical Christianity into a gaseous condition, and then caught the fumes in some kind of retort, and professed to hand us them back again improved by the sublimation, has pretty well gone the way of all hypotheses. Myths are not made in three days, or in three years, and no more time can be allowed for the formation of the myth of the Resurrection. What was the Church to feed on while the myth was growing? It would have been starved to death long before.

Then, the last new explanation which is gravely put forward, and is the prevailing one now, sustains itself by reference to undeniable facts in the history of religious movements, and of such abnormal attitudes of the mind as modern spiritualism. On the strength of which analogy we are invited to see in the faith of the early Christians in the Resurrection of the Lord a gigantic instance of hallucination. No doubt there have been, and still are, extraordinary instances of its power, especially in minds excited by religious ideas. But we have only to consider the details of the facts in hand to feel that they cannot be accounted for on such a ground. Do hallucinations lay hold on five hundred people at once? Does a hallucination last for a long country walk, and give rise to protracted conversation? Does hallucination explain the story of Christ eating and drinking before His disciples? The uncertain twilight of the garden might have begotten such an airy phantom in the brain of a single sobbing woman; but the appearances to be explained are so numerous, so varied in character, embrace so many details, appeal to so many of the senses--to the ear and hand as well as to the eye--were spread over so long a period, and were simultaneously shared by so large a number, that no theory of such a sort can account for them, unless by impugning the veracity of the records. And then we are back again on the old abandoned ground of deceit and imposture. It sounds plausible to say, Hallucination is a proved cause of many a supposed supernatural event--why not of this? But the plausibility of the solution ceases as soon as you try it on the actual facts in their variety and completeness. It has to be eked out with a length of the fox's skin of deceit before it covers them; and we may confidently assert that such a belief as the belief of the early Church in the Resurrection of the Lord was never the product either of deceit or of illusion, or of any amalgam of the two.

What new solutions the fertility of unbelief may yet bring forth, and the credulity of unbelief may yet accept, we know not; but we may firmly hold by the faith which breathed new hope and strange joy into that sad band on the first Easter morning, and rejoice with them in the glad, wonderful fact that He is risen from the dead.

**IV. For that message is a message to us as truly as to the heavy-hearted unbelieving men that first received it. We may think for a moment of the joy with which we ought to return from the empty sepulchre of the risen Saviour.**

How little these women knew that, as they went back from the grave in the morning twilight, they were the bearers of great joy which should be to all people! To them and to the first hearers of their message there would be little clear in the rush of glad surprise, beyond the blessed thought, Then He is not gone from us altogether. Sweet visions of the resumption of happy companionship would fill their minds, and it would not be until calmer moments that the stupendous significance of the fact would reveal itself.

Mary's rapturous gesture to clasp Him by the feet, when the certainty that it was in very deed He flooded her soul with dazzling light, reveals her first emotion, which no doubt was also the first with them all, Then we shall have Him with us again, and all the old joy of companionship will be ours once more. Nor were they wrong in thinking so, however little they as yet understood the future manner of their fellowship, or anticipated His leaving them again so soon. Nor are we without a share even in that phase of their joy; for the Resurrection of Jesus Christ gives us a living Lord for our love, an ever present Companion and Brother for our hearts to hold, even if our hands cannot clasp Him by the feet. A dead Christ might have been the object of faint historical admiration, and the fair statue might have stood amidst others in the galleries of history; but the risen, living Christ can love and be loved, and we too may be glad with the joy of those who have found a heart to rest their hearts upon, and a companionship that can never fail.

As the early disciples learned to reflect upon the fact of Christ's Resurrection, its riches unfolded themselves by degrees, and the earliest aspect of its powerwas the light it shed on His person and work. Taught by it, as we have seen, they recognised Him for the Messiah whom they had long expected, and for something more--the Incarnate Son of God. That phase of their joy belongs to us too. If Christ, who made such avowals of His nature as we know that He did, and hazarded such assertions of His claims, His personality and His office, as fill the Gospels, were really laid in the grave and saw corruption, then the assertions are disproved, the claims unwarranted, the office a figment of His imagination. He may still remain a great teacher, with a tremendous deduction to be made from the worth of His teaching, but all that is deepest in His own words about Himself and His relation to men must be sorrowfully put on one side. But if He, after such assertions and claims, rose from the dead, and rising, dieth no more, then for the last time, and in the mightiest tones, the voice that rent the heavens at His baptism and His transfiguration proclaims: This is My beloved Son; hear ye Him. Our joy in His Resurrection is the joy of those to whom He is therein declared to be the Son of God, and who see in Christ risen their accepted Sacrifice, and their ever-living Redeemer.

Such was the earliest effect of the Resurrection of Jesus, if we trust the records of apostolic preaching. Then by degrees the joyful thought took shape in the Church's consciousness that their Shepherd had gone before them into the dark pen where Death pastured his flocks, and had taken it for His own, for the quiet resting-place where He would make them lie down by still waters, and whence He would lead them out to the lofty mountains where His fold should be. The power of Christ's Resurrection as the pattern and pledge of ours is the final source of the joy which may fill our hearts as we turn away from that empty sepulchre.

The world has guessed and feared, or guessed and hoped, but always guessed and doubted the life beyond. Analogies, poetic adumbrations, probabilities drawn from consciousness and from conscience, from intuition and from anticipation, are but poor foundations on which to build a solid faith. But to those to whom the Resurrection of Christ is a fact their own future life is a fact. Here we have a solid certainty, and here alone. The heart says as we lay our dear ones in the grave, 'Surely we part not for ever. The conscience says, as it points us to our own evil deeds, After death the judgment. A deep indestructible instinct prophesies in every breast of a future. But all is vague and doubtful. The one proof of a life beyond the grave is the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Therefore let us be glad with the gladness of men plucked from a dark abyss of doubt and planted on the rock of solid certainty; and let us rejoice with joy unspeakable, and laden with a prophetic weight of glory, as we ring out the ancient Easter morning's greeting, The Lord is risen indeed!