

Rise & Shine
Myths and Science of Resurrection

By
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I realize today marks a peculiar confluence of two holidays, Easter and April Fools Day. And the response from some, upon seeing I'm actually giving a sermon about resurrection on Easter Sunday, has been, "You must be joking." As a non-Christian, Easter isn't a meaningful holiday for me, and one can only spin the occasion to talk about the renewal of Spring so many times, so I prefer treating it as usual by offering a sermon on some random topic of my choice. On this occasion, it just so happens, it prompted me to want to have a serious discourse about the emergence of the Resurrection motif and the possibility of resurrection ever really happening.

So, no, this is not an April Fool's joke. But, given that Easter has fallen on April 1st, I will seize the opportunity to tell the only resurrection joke I know, something we use to tell as Southern Baptists, so I'm sure it's appropriate to tell among Unitarian Universalists. Three people appear before the Pearly Gates of Heaven—let's make them an atheist, an agnostic, and a Unitarian. The atheist says, "I can't believe I'm here." The agnostic says, "I'm not sure I am." And the Unitarian holds up a protest sign demanding the gate be removed. Saint Peter tells them they can all enter so long as they correctly answer one simple question, "What's the meaning of Easter?"

The atheist says, "I'm confident Easter is the day we have picnics and set off fireworks to celebrate our freedom and independence." The agnostic says, "I'm not sure, but I think Easter is either a long weekend in September when we celebrate the labor movement, or else it's a day in February we honor the nation's Presidents." Saint Peter is disappointed with their answers, but, being merciful, says if the Unitarian gets it right, he'll let everyone in.

"It's been a while," the Unitarian says, "but if memory serves, it begins with the death of Jesus."

"Why, that's right," Peter is pleasantly surprised, "Please continue."

"Afterward, they laid him in a tomb and sealed it with a stone," the Unitarian continues.

"Yes, yes," Peter delights.

"On the third day," the Unitarian says, "the disciples arrive and discover the stone has been rolled back and the tomb is open."

"That's it," Peter says, overwhelmed with joy. "Then what?"

"Then," the Unitarian says, "Jesus emerges from the tomb, sees his shadow, then turns around and goes back in for six weeks."

All kidding aside, more than 2 billion people around the world today are celebrating the physical resurrection of Christ. As for me, I'm as confident as I am about anything, that such

an even could not and, therefore, did not happen. When asked how I can be so sure, I say because it seems evident that people can't rise from the dead. While it is now possible to resuscitate one whose heart has stopped beating for up to 20 minutes, longer if they've gone into hypothermia, no knowledge or power on Earth yet exists that can bring a person back to life after they've been dead more than an hour, let alone after days or years. There may come a time such technology exists, which is why some people have their bodies frozen, hoping they will someday be revived. But such technology isn't here yet and certainly didn't exist 2 millennia ago.

How, then, do we explain the widespread belief in Christ's resurrection after all this time? To answer this it's necessary to understand the early evolution of the various resurrection stories about him. It's also helpful to keep in mind that Jesus wasn't always considered Christ. In the beginning, he was considered no more than a man, even by his followers. It was only later, years after his death, that people began considering him *Kristos*, the Greek translation of the Hebrew word, *Messiah*. For the Hebrews, however, the Messiah would have been thought of strictly as a human being, anointed by Yahweh, to liberate them and restore the Kingdom of Israel to its Davidic glory. For the Greeks and Romans, who dominated the Jews, and appropriated Christianity, there was no problem deifying a man, or believing a human being can ascend into the heavens to become and dwell with the gods.

The differing gospel accounts reflect the transition of Christianity from a small, mostly Jewish sect, to a dominant, mostly Greco-Roman religion. The first gospel, the *Gospel of Mark*, written around 65 CE, doesn't include a resurrection appearance. Some of his followers are said to simply have discovered his empty tomb, whereupon a young man dressed in white says, "Be not afraid. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him..." And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing."

Although *Mark's* redactors eventually added endings that better corresponded with the evolving resurrection beliefs—one in the late 2nd century that has Jesus appearing, eating and drinking, instructing his followers to become poisonous snake handlers, then ascending to Heaven; and one in the 4th or 5th century that has Jesus sending his followers out to proclaim the gospel to the world—the original account, written about 30 years after his death, that ends with his followers discovering an empty tomb, too frightened to tell anyone about it, feels much more like a literary device meant make the reader imagine the fictional possibility that, in some way, Jesus might live on and we shouldn't be afraid to tell his story. In brief, resurrection in the earliest account was a literary metaphor, a hopeful way of ending an otherwise tragic tale, and encouraging his followers to move forward.

By the time Matthew was written 20 years later, in 85 CE, the story had evolved enough for its author to have included a Jesus sighting, though there was no reported contact with him. Instead, the account has Jesus telling his disciples, "Remember, I am with you always, until the end of the age."¹ This is the same gospel that earlier has Jesus telling his disciples, "For

¹ Matthew 28:20

were two or three are gathered together in my name, I am in their midst.”² Herein, the resurrection is no longer a literary metaphor, but is seen as a spiritual truth, that, somehow, even if he is unseen, Jesus is always with his followers, whenever they gather together until the end of time. It may be that some Christians went on to claim that they had encounters with the spirit of Jesus themselves, or Jesus sightings. This was the case with the Apostle Paul who claims to have been converted when he experienced Jesus as a blinding light on the road to Damascus.

But, as the myth developed, and people began to take it more literally, a natural problem emerged; if Jesus had risen and was still with them, where was he and why weren't more people seeing him? The *Gospel of Luke* comes to the rescue around 90 CE by adding an ascension to the evolving account. Again, this wasn't hard to buy for those Greeks and Romans attracted to the new esoteric cult of Christ, given were already use to their revered emperors dying and ascending to dwell among the gods. In fact, Roman Emperor Augustus was said to have done many of the things the author of Luke later claimed about Jesus, including being born of a virgin, walking on water, performing miracles, rising from the dead, and ascending to Heaven. For the Greeks and Romans to accept the greatness of a dead Jewish teacher, he would, at the very least, had to have been as august as one of their deified emperors.

At this point Christians not only wondered and argued whether Jesus was human or divine, but whether his resurrection was spiritual or physical. Hence, the last Canonical gospel written, *The Gospel of John*, at the beginning of the 2nd century CE, adds the story of doubting Thomas, who feels Jesus' scars, proving it was, indeed, physical. So that, in short, is how the story evolved, from metaphor at the beginning, through a spiritual, then divine phase, until, less than a hundred years after his death, came to widely accept the resurrection was a physical, historical event—a belief that has lasted to this day.

It also seems likely once Christianity became Romanized it would take on many of the established beliefs, rituals, and holidays in its own fashion. One of those would naturally have been a celebration of the Vernal Equinox, which happens at the beginning of Spring. The ancients celebrated it in honor of the goddess of the East, from whence the Sun appears to rise. Her name, *Eastre*, which may go back further still to the Assyrian fertility goddess, Ishtar, is thought to be the origin of what we now pronounce, “Easter.” Although the Romans may have accepted Christianity as the official State religion once Emperor Constantine declared it so, it would have been hard for them to give up their favorite holidays. So, just as the Romans appropriated and renamed the Greek gods, their Holy Roman Church appropriated the pagan celebration of the Vernal Equinox and made it their own.

In this sense the resurrection retains its original meaning as a metaphor of the rising Sun, the Sun up in the sky, that is, not the son of God. As such, Christ, sometimes called the, “Light of the world,” joins a plethora of mythical Sun deities thought to bring light to this world. He is like the Greek Horus, Helios, Attis, and Dionysus, the Roman Sol, the Persian Mithra, the Assyrian Tammuz, the Egyptian Osiris and Ra, the Norse Odin, the Aztec Quetzacoatl, and

² Matthew 18:20

India's Krishna, who were all said to be born on or around December 25th, near the Winter Solstice, when, that is, the Sun returns and the days begin lengthening. As M.M. Mangasarian says in his classic work, *The Truth About Jesus*, "the inference is that the Son of God and Sun of heaven enjoying the same birthday, were at one time identical beings."³ Because of this, and other mythical allusions, Mangasarian believed Jesus was entirely mythical, that there was no such historical person to begin with. While he makes a convincing argument, I still think there's enough to suggest Jesus was a real person, though it's not possible to know much about him or who he really was, and it is the Christ of Faith that is no more than a mythical invention.

For this reason, I also believe Christianity would exist today, with or without Jesus ever having lived and died. In his letter to the Corinthians, the Apostle Paul wrote, "If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain,"⁴ but Constantine could have as easily based his centralized religion on numerous other resurrection deities. Whether Mithras, Helios, Sol, Dionysus, or some other made up deity based upon the real life of another historical person, I believe we would still have a major world religion today with many of the same qualities and history as Christianity.

So that's a bit about the history and origins of the resurrection myth, of how it evolved during the first hundred years of Christianity, and has pretty much remained the same ever since; and, of how what began as a creative literary metaphor likely ended up blending well with the preestablished practices of those in the ancient Greco-Roman world, especially when it came to celebrating the Vernal Equinox in honor of Eastre, or Ishtar. Hence, to be clear, I personally consider the story of Christ's resurrection just that, an ancient myth, and do not believe it could possibly have been a historical or physical event. In short, I do not believe that anyone, not one person, has ever risen from death. But, as is our Unitarian Universalist way, it is okay if you do, just as it is okay if I don't.

But this doesn't mean I don't believe resurrection isn't possible, at least not theoretically, and that, as science and medicine progress, it won't someday become common practice. This is why, since the 1960s a small handful of people, about 250, have had their bodies frozen after death, so they can be revived when such technology exists. Of course, just because 250 people believe something doesn't make it so, anymore than two-and-a-half-billion people believing something does. Nor is it necessarily fair, given the decaying process is immediately halted, to make the claim the cryonics patients might be "resurrected," rather than, "revived," or, "resuscitated." We already know it's possible to revive someone whose vitals have stopped for short periods of time, longer if they've gone into hypothermia, but no one has ever been resuscitated after decay begins.

So the real question is, will genuine resurrection ever become possible? Is it possible, at least theoretically, to restore people to life who have long ago turned to ashes or dust? Will it ever be possible, as the Hebrew prophet, Ezekiel imagined 500 years before Christ, "Your dead

³ Mangasarian, M.M., *Mangasarian Volume One*, Steve Dustcircle, ed., aLife Beyond Books, Columbus, Ohio, 2014, Kindle version, loc. 409.

⁴ I Corinthians 15:14

shall live, their corpses shall rise. Oh dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy. For your dew is a radiant dew, and the earth will give birth to those long dead.”⁵ As impossible as this may seem to us now, physicist Frank Tipler doesn’t think its out of the question. In his book, *The Physics of Immortality*, Tipler says, “...resurrection theory is pure physics. There is nothing supernatural in the theory, and hence there is no appeal, anywhere, to faith.”⁶

Removing the question from religion, and firmly rejecting Christ’s physical resurrection, Tipler goes on to consider it from the perspective of physics and math, suggesting resurrection is already happening all the time. “At the subnuclear level,” he says, “the quarks and gluons which make up the neutrons and protons of the atoms in our bodies are being annihilated and recreated on a timescale of less than 10^{-23} seconds; thus we are actually being annihilated and replicated—resurrected— 10^{-23} times a second in the normal course of our lives.”⁷ It’s just a matter of mathematics for Tipler, who reminds us, though there seems to be an endless number of possibilities in the Universe, that the number, though large, is actually finite, and the right computer will eventually exist that can calculate all of them. “[T]he dead will be resurrected,” he says, “when the computer capacity of the universe is so large that the amount of capacity required to store all possible human simulations is an insignificant fraction of the entire capacity.”⁸

In fact, Tipler has already calculated the number of possibilities each of us has, “ 4×10^{53} times per second,” which is huge, considering the average person lives about 2.5 billion seconds, “but it’s finite.”⁹ So, he reasons, once computers achieve the ability to calculate every quantum state, down to $10^{10/123}$ bits, they will be able to resurrect everyone who has ever lived. And why would these intelligent machines want to resurrect us? Tipler suggests, in brief, it will be out of curiosity about their own beginnings and origins. “Strictly speaking,” he says, “the question of whether we shall be raised is separate from the question of whether we shall be granted eternal life after being raised.”¹⁰

Other scientists today, including Ray Kurzweil, who, in 1965 won the international science fair when he was 17, and received the National Medal of Technology from President Clinton in 1999, and was hired by Google in 2012, at age 64, to work in the area of artificial intelligence and speech recognition. He’s also a bestselling author of books about the future of technology, like *The Age of Spiritual Machines* and *The Singularity is Near*. In short, Kurzweil, like Tipler, believes our technology and our biology is rapidly coming together, and that in the very near future we will transcend into a new kind of human species, almost overnight, without even noticing it. We’ve already seen this, to some degree, through the behavioral transformation brought on by the exponential evolution of computers, cellphones, and the internet.

⁵ Ezekiel 37:5-6

⁶ Tipler, Frank J., *The Physics of Immortality*, Anchor Books, Doubleday, New York, NY, 1994, p. 16.

⁷ Ibid., p. 236

⁸ Ibid., p. 225

⁹ Ibid., p. 223

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 227

Just yesterday, through the very new technology of virtual reality, I spent about an hour designing and furnishing a virtual home that towers above a futuristic city with holographic billboards and driverless cars and trucks whizzing past me on the streets and interstates below. I then sat down on the balcony of my virtual home, as if I'd been transported inside the beautiful computer simulation, experiencing it 360 degrees all around me, then opened my virtual desktop, clicked on my Kindle app, and began reading a book on the decline of democracy. If this sounds strange and you've not yet experienced virtual reality, you will, very soon, as it becomes as ubiquitous as cellphones within the coming months, and is sure to transform us and our society even more quickly than anything else has. It's one thing to use a computer program, wait until you experience what it's like to be inside one.

The merger is already happening and is poised to suddenly change everything. During the 21st century, right now, Kurzweil estimates technology will advance, "one thousand times greater than what was achieved in the 20th century."¹¹ This "singularity," as he calls the point at which the Universe becomes self-aware, "will represent the culmination of the merger of our biological thinking and existence with our technology, resulting in a world that is still human but transcends our biological roots."¹² When this happens, he continues, "Our mortality will be in our own hands. We will be able to live as long as we want (a subtly different statement than saying we will live forever). We will fully understand human thinking and will vastly extend and expand its reach."¹³ "By the end of this century," he predicts, "the nonbiological portion of our intelligence will be trillions of trillions of times more powerful than unaided human intelligence."¹⁴ In short, he's not only predicting a computer fast enough to calculate every quantum state of human existence, but that *we* will be that computer—a self-aware, emotional being that has evolved from what we are right now.

So, let me close by talking briefly about right now, not the distant past or the near future. The most famous figure in Tibet, who has probably become as mythical as Christ, was Jetsun Milarepa (Rje-tsun Mi-la-ras-pa), is considered the greatest mystic in its history. The Dalai Lama has said, "I cry, weep and feel a strong sense of faith each time I read or hear the story of Milarepa, the great yogi of Tibet." Buddhist, as you know, believe in reincarnation, that we are trapped in our unhealthy habits over many lifetimes until we awaken and find release. Although the Buddha is considered the first ever to have achieved such Nirvana, there's no telling how many lives he may have lived before doing so. According to Tibetan Buddhism, Milarepa is the only person ever to have achieved such a state in just one lifetime.

Through the course of his life, having seen his family killed when he was a child, growing up in poverty because of it, he was vengeful and murderous, and did many other terrible things, but later in his life he realized his mistakes and was able to stop repeating them. That's it, Milarepa was just ordinary person with lots of tough breaks, bruises and warts, who learned to become a better person, not in the by and by, but in the here and now. And this is how, I

¹¹ Kurzweil, Ray, *The Singularity is Near*, Viking, Penguin Group, New York, NY, 2005, p. 11

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

think a talk on resurrection should end, that no matter how much faith we have in old stories, or in future technologies, the one thing we can be sure of is that each of us has one lifetime, this lifetime, and it's up to us to make the best of it and to become the person possible while we still can.