

CHRIST'S RESURRECTION MET WITH DOUBT

Did Christ Jesus rise from the dead? It goes without saying that the Christian scriptures assume he did. The documents not only assume it, they affirm it in so many words time and time again.

You get the impression there was no doubt about it. At least not for the earliest followers of Jesus. Nor for the authors of the biblical documents.

But when you think about it that must have been some trick. It must have taken some terrific mental gymnastics to buy the proposition that the man was dead and buried and that he then popped up alive and kicking two or three days after his interment.

On the face of it, such a possibility must have seemed incredulous. It was unbelievable. And there must have been considerable skepticism, even in the ranks of Jesus' disciples.

So it is to the credit of the ancient authors that they didn't completely whitewash all doubt from the accounts.

One of the most revealing examples of such mental hesitation is found at the end of the first gospel, at Matthew 28:17.

The closing scene of Matthew's gospel pictures the eleven surviving disciples (Judas had committed suicide in a fit of remorse) on an unnamed mountain top.

There some weeks after his resurrection Jesus joins them. Ostensibly his purpose is to give them their directives for the future.

The paragraph reads like a stylized commissioning ceremony. On the basis of his universal authority Jesus sends his men across the map to baptize and teach.

He ends with a promise to be with them—in precisely what fashion is not stated—until the job is completed.

All in all, it is an impressive send-off. What catches a careful reader off guard, however, is Matthew's description of the disciples' reaction.

"When they saw him they fell down and worshiped...." Which is exactly what you would expect. "...but some doubted."

There's the kicker: the honest suggestion that some of Jesus' closest friend hesitated. They couldn't quite buy what they were supposed to be seeing.

Modern readers may chose to interpret the assertions of Jesus' resurrection in any way they see it: from a literal insistence on the resuscitation of his corpse, to the suggestion that his "spirit" or "memory" is what lived on, or to a flat-out denial that any kind of a raising took place.

In any event, it helps to note that the ancient writers were well aware that resurrections are not to be taken lightly, as a matter of course.

Whatever they were driving at when they told of Jesus' rising from a grave, they were intending to suggest something out of the ordinary.

The most realistic reaction to such an extraordinary contention is doubt. So it's to their credit that the writers made a point to include such doubtful response in their account.

However you choose to deal with the religious claims of people who affirm the resurrection of Jesus, it's encouraging to note their honesty.

Mixed in with all the hoopla about Jesus' rising from the dead is the mention about the doubt of his followers. That's the kind of note which gives a flavor of realism to the whole story.