

Anita E. Keire

FAITH STATEMENTS: DIALOGUES ON JESUS' NATURE, WORK AND RESURRECTION

Confidence, hope, and trust are more appropriate perspectives on the Resurrection. . . . To see beneath the culture-bound language of the Easter story and into its inner reality involves more than accepting an isolated aberration. It is to make a life choice to live by the hope that this is what reality is really like. Therefore hope, not belief, is what the story seeks to evoke, a hope that is not based on weighing possibilities but on one's own perception of what is most real in life – what some people call “God” - especially at times when there seems to be no way out.

Harvey Cox
When Jesus Came to Harvard¹

Chapter 2

Some Contemporary Beliefs on Jesus' Resurrection

Anita: The concept and nature of Jesus' resurrection have been the subject of debate since the dawn of Christianity. Most early Christians believed Jesus was raised from the dead; and that after his resurrection, he visited his followers in some sort of corporeal body. Forty days later, he ascended to heaven. Many people then and today doubt the actuality of Jesus' bodily resurrection. They do not consider his resurrection important for their acceptance of Jesus' teachings. And if people do believe in Jesus' resurrection, they do not agree on whether it was bodily or spiritual and/or a confirmation by God of Jesus and his work.

The Pharisees of Jesus' time believed in a general and global resurrection when *all* the dead would be restored to life at some future time. Saul, a Pharisee, could not imagine God raising a single, crucified person from the dead. After Saul's conversion to Christianity, he went by the name of Paul. He echoes and articulates his revised version of his Pharisaic belief in resurrection when he writes, "Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised: and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain."²

Paul's understanding of Jesus' resurrection is very important to the Christian church and has challenged my beliefs as I know it has challenged the beliefs of most critics and skeptics. Does Paul's ancient perspective still ring true?

Thomas: Is Paul saying that belief in Jesus' bodily resurrection from the dead is central to the Christian faith?

Anita: Yes.

Thomas: I do not like his either/or thinking. Surely there are other possibilities.

Anita: Most Christian theologians claim that the resurrection of Jesus is the linchpin to the Christian story upon which the Christian faith is based. Paul also makes another claim: "Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable."³ Paul calls this transformation of our bodies a mystery. He says we cannot enter the kingdom of God with our perishable bodies. Only those with a transformed, imperishable body can gain entrance.

Thomas: I really don't believe in the resurrection of the body. Such a belief is an early, almost primitive Christian idea. For me, belief or nonbelief in the resurrection doesn't really matter. How can a dead man rise from the dead? I could accept perhaps that Jesus was resuscitated. But once you are dead, you are dead.

Anita: At various times in my life, I entertained some of your views and doubts. Perhaps that is why I chose the topic of resurrection first. Resurrection is so counterintuitive. Paul talks about a transformed, imperishable body, not a resuscitated body.⁴ Consider the difference between Jesus' afterlife and Lazarus being raised from the dead.⁵ Lazarus had been dead for four days. The mourners were at Lazarus' grave. All people present witnessed Jesus call Lazarus back to life, not through resuscitation but through voice command only. What does that tell us about Jesus?

Mary: As a Roman Catholic, I believe Jesus has God's power. In Genesis 1 God created the universe and everything in it simply by voice command.

Thomas: Bringing Lazarus back to life would have to be a miracle. I don't believe in miracles. Miracles defy the laws of nature. If you believe in the laws of nature, as I do, there should be no miracles. Maybe Lazarus never died. Maybe his coming back to life is some kind of stunt to whip up support for Jesus as a miracle worker.

Anita: For a moment, let us assume that you believe in miracles. The story of Lazarus found in John's Gospel foreshadows Jesus' death and resurrection but with a difference. Even though Lazarus is brought back to life, he will die again either through sickness or old age. His life is finite. In John's Gospel, the early Christians are telling believers that Jesus not only rose from the dead but lives and lives eternally. Many Christians today believe Jesus is present to them through the Holy Spirit when they read and contemplate scripture and when they gather for worship.

Thomas: All that you say may or may not be true. But couldn't Jesus have been resuscitated?

Mary: Definitely not. I do not think any resuscitation as a possibility can hold up to scrutiny. Roman soldiers were very efficient killing machines. Soldiers had to kill or be killed. Jesus meant nothing to them. Why would they risk their lives to let Jesus live?

Anita: The Gospel of John tells us that the soldiers broke the legs of the two thieves to hasten their deaths. "But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out."⁶ This flow of blood and water indicates that Jesus' lungs had collapsed. He was dead. He died from asphyxiation.

Mary: We must believe the teachings of the Church that originate from Holy Scriptures..

Thomas: Why?

Mary: The scriptures are our only reliable testimony on Jesus' resurrection. Jesus was dead. The Gospel of John tells us that Joseph of Arimathea wrapped Jesus' body in winding sheets and put him in a tomb in a garden near the place of crucifixion.⁷ A huge boulder closed the entrance to the tomb. Roman soldiers guarded the tomb. The Roman guards, on threat of death, did not disobey their orders or fall asleep on the job.

Thomas: So what is your point?

Mary: A half-dead crucified man could not inspire Jesus' frightened disciples. It is preposterous to think that fearful, unsophisticated men would or could invent a tale that Jesus was resurrected from the dead and lives. Nor would his followers dedicate the rest of their lives to and suffer for these beliefs if Jesus were only resuscitated and could die again. Remember, these same followers, for fear of their lives, abandoned Jesus on the cross. They went into hiding. They made no attempt to recover and bury his body.

Sarah: You know we Jews do not believe Jesus rose from the dead. We don't believe God would resurrect a single individual. We all must wait for the general resurrection.

Anita: Christians and Jews have historically differed on Jesus' resurrection. New Testament scripture tells us Jesus' apostles and over 500 witnesses⁸ saw the risen Jesus. The Gospels of Matthew, Luke, and John record specific resurrection appearances. Jesus came back to life. He was no ghost or disembodied soul. Nor were witnesses hallucinating. These people had face-to-face discussions with the risen Jesus.

Thomas: Do face-to-face discussions *prove* that Jesus' appearances are not a hallucination or a ghost or a resuscitated body?

Mary: Yes, they do. The sheer number of people to whom Jesus appeared attests they could not all be hallucinating. Jesus was visible. He was recognizable. He had a body. He could eat. Jesus' body bore his wounds. Why don't you believe the testimony of the witnesses?⁹

Thomas: They may be biased reports trying to convince everyone of a certain viewpoint. For instance, we have no record of anyone seeing Jesus after his 40 days on earth were supposed to have ended. Maybe he was resuscitated somehow and did in fact die after 40 days. Or maybe he escaped to France with Mary Magdalene and lived happily ever after. His disciples made up the story that he survived the crucifixion. Then, when he was no longer around, they said he ascended to heaven.

Edward: As a liberal Protestant, I wonder about Jesus' disciples' claim that Jesus appeared in different physical forms such as a stranger on the road to Emmaus and as a blinding light to Paul on his way to Damascus. In at least two instances, no one recognized Jesus. He also could pass through closed doors.

Anita: Because Jesus was unrecognizable by some and could pass through closed doors and at the same time be corporeal, his disciples came to the conclusion that Jesus had entered a new mode of existence. Can you accept that hypothesis?

Edward: A new mode of existence? Perhaps. As a scientist, there are many "unknowns" in the world. We are constantly discovering explanations for phenomena which seemed mysterious in the past. It is entirely possible based on our present experience, that some parallel universe, some altered states, some undiscovered different dimensions may exist which we will learn about in

the future. Quantum physics is proof that we did not know how the world around us exists, how matter behaves. Future discoveries about current mysteries like “dark matter” and the “heavy” neutrino will open a new world to us. Before the past few decades in scientific discoveries and thinking, I would have had to reject the resurrection out of hand. Now I’m not so sure. The mysteries of the past and the mystery of Jesus’ resurrection, especially for non-believers, may be explained in the future.

Thomas: Today’s scholars say that Jesus’ resurrection is a legend or a myth that the early Jesus’ movements invented. Do you agree with them?

Milton: No, I don’t. As a philosopher, I can tell you that “anybody can say anything without any historical or theological basis . . . Legends, however wise, are only fictions devised by mortal minds, not by God or by nature. Resurrection is also not a myth . . . Christ’s resurrection, unlike myths, is pinned down to a real, specific concrete time and place in history, and certified by eyewitnesses.”¹⁰

Anita: On the other hand, Hans Kung, a Roman Catholic theologian, author, and professor, would disagree with your use and definition for myths and legends. Kung suggests that the literary form of myth and story are interwoven into the truth of the Christian message. Certain literary forms are used by authors to capture and stir the largest audience. Wouldn’t you prefer a dramatic story of the resurrection to abstract ideas and dogmas?

Thomas: Yes. Story would be more interesting.

Anita: A believer and/or an inquirer may overlook literary form and quality. He searches for universal truths and consequences. He is concerned “in the reality itself, in the person depicted in literary form, his fate and the consequences of this for himself and his society. He wants to know whether and to what extent his faith is based on illusion or on historical reality. Any faith based on illusion is not really faith but superstition Narrative presentation and critical reflection therefore must be united in Christian theology and proclamation.”¹¹

Thomas: I like those thoughts--that narrative presentation and critical reflection must be united in Christian theology and proclamation. Abstraction and dogmas about God and God in Jesus Christ are unappealing, boring, and lifeless.

Anita: Abstractions and dogma are our attempts to pin down and define the indefinable. But they do serve a purpose for outlining the truths of our faith. Another important point to consider is when historians and literary critics criticize the inconsistency in the resurrection appearance stories; they fail to look at those stories as believers.¹² Kung says the Easter stories are biased depositions and testimonies by committed believers that firmly maintain the truth of the risen Jesus.¹³ Minor inconsistencies in their stories do not override their authors’ purpose and religious significance.

Thomas: Do you think that Jesus’ disciples made up the empty tomb and appearance stories in the gospels?

Edward: Yes, that's a possibility. But as I said, these stories may be quite accurate even though explanations for Jesus' appearances are unintelligible in our current state of scientific knowledge.

Thomas: Do the rest of you believe the gospels' reports on the resurrection are true, or are they lies?

Mary: Thomas, look at it this way. There will always be some people who have different opinions on any important event. For instance, facts surrounding President Kennedy's assassination still circulate. Many people believe they have not been given the truth surrounding this event. Similarly, many doubters suspect Jesus' disciples made up the facts about Jesus' resurrection. What doubters fail to take into consideration is that not one of his disciples changed his story. Nor did the Jewish and Roman leaders ever recover Jesus' body to prove the disciples wrong.

Thomas: I'm still not convinced.

Sarah: Nor am I.

Milton: Think about it. Something miraculous occurred that flung wide the doors of the disciples' self-made prison. These once frightened disciples were emboldened to spread the good news of Jesus' resurrection. They suffered imprisonment, beatings, harassment, and martyrdom for spreading the news of their encounter with the risen Jesus.

Thomas: Do you mean to tell me that Christians must accept that Jesus' resurrection is a miracle? Do miracles really happen?

Anita: Many people believe in miracles. I believe miracles can and do happen. It may be very hard for you to accept something as true when in your mind you believe it not to be true. And, yes, most believers in Jesus' resurrection believe it is a miracle, that is, that God intervened in human history. As Maimonides, a great Jewish philosopher of the Middle Ages who did not believe in a physical resurrection once said, "a miracle has to be accepted on faith alone."¹⁴ "To deny miracles is to deny God's freedom and power, and that would lead to a denial of the entire structure of Judaism."¹⁵

Mary: You could also say the same is true for Christianity.

Anita: Indeed you could. Today we've had an interesting conversation with many views being expressed on Jesus' resurrection. For our next discussion, we will examine pre-modern Jewish beliefs on resurrection that existed before and during the early Christian era. It's always important to know the history of a particular belief.

¹ Harvey Cox, *When Jesus Came to Harvard* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004), 282-283.

² 1 Cor. 15:12-14.

³ 1 Cor. 15:50.

⁴ 1 Cor. 15.

⁵ John 11.

⁶ John 19:31-34.

⁷ John 19:38-42.

⁸ 1 Cor. 15:6.

⁹ John 20:26-29

¹⁰ Peter Kreeft & Ronald K. Tacelli, *Handbook of Christian Apologetics* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 180.

¹¹ Hans Kung, *On Being a Christian* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1976), 412-418.

¹² Kung, *On Being a Christian*, 418.

¹³ Kung, *On Being a Christian*, 349.

¹⁴ Neil Gillman, *Death of Death, Resurrection and Immortality in Jewish Thought* (Woodstock: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2002), 148.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 160.