

SOLITUDE SHORTS *from* HODDER FAITH

ESSAYS IN EXTRAORDINARY TIMES

Solitude Shorts is a series of essays from Hodder & Stoughton, provided free of charge for Christian reflection during the Covid-19 pandemic. Isolation may well be the word of the moment, but perhaps we might rather reframe this time as one set apart for solitude, something Christians have sought throughout the ages. For we are never isolated from God, who is closer to us than we are to ourselves, in the words of St Augustine. As the title suggests, the essays are all brief, taking approximately only five minutes to read. Please distribute them to whomever you feel might gain some encouragement. If you would like to receive these essays directly on publication, please [fill in your details here](#) to be added to our newsletter. In this final excerpt from Nick Page's book *The Longest Week*, he celebrates the triumph over death that Jesus' resurrection represents and offers us seven reasons we can believe in it as a physical, rather than simply a spiritual or metaphorical, resurrection. At a time when death seems close and the events of Holy Week have been all-too resonant, Jesus' resurrection offers hope to the world. Happy Easter!

The Longest Week: Easter Sunday

by

Nick Page

'The resurrection was real. It happened.'

Whatever else we believe about the ancient world, we should be aware that people were far better acquainted with death than we are. They saw it around them on the streets and in the gutters, in the houses and on the execution sites that studded the Roman Empire. So we should credit them with knowing the difference between death and life, between a corpse and a walking, living, fish-eating bloke. It is popular to see the resurrection accounts as spiritual or metaphorical, but the ancient world didn't think that way and the Gospel writers didn't claim any such thing. The whole point of the hands and the feet and the fish is their physicality. No Gospel writer claims that Jesus went into the tomb as a man and came out as a metaphor. Their claims are that the resurrection was real. It happened. There are no middle, metaphorical exits. So what, if any, proof can be offered to support the eyewitness testimony?

First, there is the use of women as witnesses. To put it bluntly, no self-respecting religion would rely on the testimony of women. They were almost completely disqualified as witnesses in Jewish courts. So the choice of women as the prime witnesses to the empty tomb would be a terrible piece of strategic planning, unless they genuinely were the first witnesses and the Gospel accounts were trying to get things right.

Second, there is the confusion between the accounts. This might be seen as damaging to their case, but if the testimonies were invented by later editors, one would expect a lot more uniformity. We would expect the inconsistencies to be ironed out and the difficulties to be explained away. But there is none of that, which can be only because the early Church believed it important to preserve the original accounts, even where they diverged.

Third, there's the honesty of the accounts. Matthew, for example, tells us that 'When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted' (Matthew 28:17). I can't imagine why anyone would write that if they were trying to present an airbrushed case. The doubt is there only because some *did* doubt.

Fourth, with regard to the empty tomb, there is a complete absence of any counter-claim. The idea that the resurrection story was made up makes sense only if the tomb was actually empty. The emptiness of the tomb was never, in fact, a subject of controversy. Only the *reason* for its emptiness.

Fifth, there is the fact that the early Church did not venerate the tomb. They remembered where it was, of course, but there is no evidence that they went there to worship. No writer of the early Church, from Acts onwards, records them meeting at the place even to worship. The reason is that there was nothing there to venerate.

Sixth. Within two generations of Jesus' death – while there were still people around who had witnessed the events – there were some five hundred people who had seen Jesus. Paul's message is pretty clear: you want witnesses? We've got witnesses, and they're still around.

Seventh. Resurrection was such a *weird* thing to believe in. But the early Church lived it out. Something changed these people into a force. Something turned a huddle of frightened peasants into a world-changing phenomenon.

Acts depicts the rapid growth of the Church – 3,000 baptised on the day of Pentecost alone. Even if we dispute the figures, the sheer fact of history is that Christianity flourished and grew, despite the frequent persecutions to which it was subjected. Look, for example, at the transformation in Jesus' own family. At the cross, Jesus' male relatives appear to have been absent, but afterwards his brothers were in Jerusalem: 'They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers' (Acts 1:14). Something changed for them. And the answer, according to Paul at least, was that they had seen Jesus. His brother James, who initially thought him deluded, ended up leading the first church in Jerusalem and was eventually martyred by one of Annas' sons. Another of Jesus' brothers, Jude, has a New Testament letter attributed to him. Even if, as some scholars argue, the attribution isn't genuine, it shows that Jude also became a prominent figure in the early Church. There would be no point in attributing a letter to someone who had never been a follower. Two, at least, of Jesus' brothers are suddenly turned round from disbelief to belief.

Personally, I have never been able to come up with an explanation for the growth of the early Church and the persistence of belief in this man that didn't involve resurrection. Take the resurrection away from Jesus and all you get is failure. Honourable failures do not start religious movements. The martyrs at Masada were remembered, but no one started a religion in their honour.

This, then, is the pattern of the Longest Week: On the Sunday before, Jesus had entered the city in triumph from Bethany. Luke brings us full circle: Jesus leads his disciples out of Jerusalem, up along the Mount of Olives as far as Bethany, where he 'left them and was taken up into heaven' (Luke 24:51). He entered in triumph and he exits in triumph. It has been a long, hard, strange journey. And it's not finished yet.

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