

“The third day he rose from the dead;
he ascended into heaven,
and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty;
from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.”

Acts 2:32–36 (NRSV)

³²This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses. ³³Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear. ³⁴For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says,

“The Lord said to my Lord,

“Sit at my right hand,

³⁵ until I make your enemies your footstool.”

³⁶Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.”

2 Corinthians 5:6–10 (NRSV)

⁶So we are always confident; even though we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord— ⁷for we walk by faith, not by sight. ⁸Yes, we do have confidence, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. ⁹So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. ¹⁰For all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil.

Why do we worship Jesus of Nazareth?

The affirmations we will examine today make the answer crystal clear.

This week, we come to the final affirmations about Jesus in the Apostles’ Creed. There are four key claims made:

- Jesus was resurrected on the third day after his death.
- Jesus returned to heaven.
- Jesus was exalted by God.
- Jesus is the judge before whom all will stand.

“On the third day . . .”

The first claim is both astounding and straightforward. We affirm that on the third day¹ after his death on the cross, Jesus was bodily resurrected. The wording of the creed could be clearer, in that it uses the passive voice, leaving the reader unclear exactly who is accomplishing the resurrection. Did Jesus raise himself? The answer is no. Jesus was dead and buried, as the creed affirms. Dead people can’t resurrect themselves. It is God who raised Jesus².

¹The claim isn’t that 72 hours elapsed, but simply that Jesus died on a Friday and was resurrected on a Sunday – three days: Fri., Sat., and Sun.

²Yes, Jesus is God, but that isn’t the same as saying Jesus resurrected himself. If we try to express this in Trinitarian terms, we might be tempted to say that the resurrection of Jesus was the work of the Father or the Spirit. But Scripture isn’t always explicit or consistent in such things. Thus, Christians have always spoken simply of God acting and speaking, for God is both truly three (persons) and one (divine being). Diversity and unity. Each of the three persons of the Trinity are fully and completely God, but none are all of God. There is one God who is not merely the sum of the three persons. Yes, it is ok if you don’t quite see how this can be. No one can.

Most Jews of Jesus' day believed that God would bodily resurrect all the dead when the Last Days arrived and God put all things to rights. However, most Jews could not accept the claim that God had resurrected this one man only, this Galilean Jew who had died an humiliating death by crucifixion.

The Greeks too spoke of resurrection, *anastasis*, but they believed it could never happen. They could conceive of resurrection, but they knew that the dead stay dead. For the Greeks and Jews alike, resurrection meant newly embodied life after death. It would be like Achilles returning from Hades or Joshua from Sheol.³

The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God the Father Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth;

And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord:
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, dead, and buried;
the third day he rose from the dead;
he ascended into heaven,
and sitteth at the right hand of God
the Father Almighty;
from thence he shall come to judge
the quick and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.

There is one point here about which we need to be *absolutely clear*, for I hear Christians getting this wrong all the time.

We are not talking about resuscitation, being brought back from the dead to return to one's life (as on a modern-day operating table), still having to face death. This was Lazarus – Jesus brought him back to life, but Lazarus returned to his home, aged, and died. The same is true of all the people in the Bible who are brought *back* to life.

In contrast, we claim that Jesus was resurrected by God, not merely resuscitated. He passed through death to a life after death (Friday evening to early Sunday morning) and then to newly-embodied life on Sunday. Jesus will not face death again. Jesus is the *only* person in the Bible that was resurrected.

From the perspective of Jesus' fellow Jews, by the act of resurrection God had done for Jesus what God will one day do for everyone. That's why Paul uses an agricultural metaphor to describe Jesus as the "first fruits of those who have died" (1 Cor. 15:20), the first person, but not the only person, to be resurrected.

It is understandable that Christians tend to see the resurrection as the place of God's victory, the climax of the biblical story. We are Easter people, after all. It is why the early Christians began to worship on Sunday, rather than on the Jewish Sabbath of Saturday. However, this is not the perspective of the New Testament writers.

In the NT, Jesus' resurrection is neither the place of God's victory over sin and death nor the climax of the story. Rather, the victory is won by Jesus' faithfulness all the way to his death on the cross. Jesus' death is the atoning sacrifice which makes us "at-one" with God.

Using a variety of images, the NT writers concentrate on what Jesus' suffering and death has accomplished; i.e. we are reconciled to God, justified, put into a right relationship with God, declared innocent in a law court, returned from exile, sins forgiven, pardoned, redeemed, etc. However, the NT does not give us a single theory of *how* this was accomplished.

The resurrection is the proof that these claims are so. The resurrection demonstrates that Jesus was who he claimed to be, not merely another failed would-be messiah who met a bad end. The resurrection is the vindication of Jesus and, thus, the claim upon which the truth claims of Christianity stand or fall.

Finally, the resurrection demonstrates that we worship a promise-keeping God who has created, is creating, and will create again. It is as if all of God's promises about the

³These are the abodes of the dead in these ancient cosmologies.

restoration of humanity and the cosmos come forward to that Sunday morning when Jesus walked out of an empty tomb.

“Ascended into heaven”

This too may seem a very simple, straightforward statement and, in a way, it is. But I think we tend to miss its meaning. In the ancient cosmology, the gods are “up there” and the higher humans could get above the ground, the closer they were to the gods.⁴ Thus, when Jesus leaves the disciples to return to God’s place, he ascends skyward (see Acts 1). If Jesus was going to return to the Father, then the disciples would expect him to head off into the clouds, just as it is recounted in the book of Acts.

Of course, we know more now about the structure of the cosmos God has created. If we head skyward, we end up in outer space and, eventually, pass through other galaxies.⁵

Thus, this phrase in the creeds isn’t a claim about Jesus heading off to a particular spot in space-time. Instead, it is a claim about Jesus’ vindication (being proved right) and exaltation (being elevated in rank and power). The ascension language of the New Testament is exaltation language. Thus, the simple statement about Jesus’ ascending is of a single piece with the next statement.

“Sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty”

Who’s your boss? Your neighbors’ boss? How about the folks an ocean away? Who is ultimately in charge of this planet we call earth? It is Jesus, regardless of whether everyone has heard of him or acknowledges that he is in charge. You might say to yourself, “Ok, but it sure seems like the inmates are running the asylum!” And at times, even most of the time, it sure does. How much must Jesus value our freedom, how essential it must be to the cosmos that God created. We are given a lot of freedom, but it is still Jesus who is Lord, who sits at the right hand of God in power and might and glory.

With this phrase about God’s right hand, the exaltation of Jesus is further amplified and wraps back upon the earlier affirmation that Jesus is Lord. The phrase itself is simply a very Old Testament way of speaking of God’s throne room, where one is given lordship and dominion by God, as in Psalm 110:1, “The Lord says to my lord, “Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.” Jesus quotes this verse to Caiaphas at his trial, along with Daniel 7:13-14, another throne room image. It is a way of affirming that Jesus has taken his place as King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Thus, when we come to these phrases of the Creed, we need to hear them as Jesus’ glorification (lifting up for all to see that he is Messiah, Lord, and, indeed, God himself):

➤ crucifixion => resurrection => ascension=> seated at God’s right hand

It is like a glorification arc and it compels us to acknowledge that Jesus is to be worshipped as God as worshipped, and obeyed as God is obeyed.⁶

Judging the quick and dead

No, this is not about being speedy. “Quick” is simply an archaic wording⁷ referring to being alive. Thus, we are affirming that Jesus will be the judge of everyone who has ever lived or are living when the day of judgment comes.

⁴ As in the story of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11), the pyramids, and the Babylonian ziggurats.

⁵Let’s set aside the curvature of space-time; it will just make our heads hurt! This is not a physics lesson. I also wonder what folks a few hundred years from now will be saying about our understanding of the cosmos. I have this feeling that we don’t know as much as we think we know.

⁶It is important to reiterate that the Apostles’ Creed comes from the early centuries of Christianity, when believers were still working out even the basics of a Trinitarian understanding of God.

⁷Many churches use this traditional, even archaic wording, because it links us to the billions of Christians who have come before us, most of whom have stood and said this creed and others just as we do.

I don't know about you, but the whole idea of being judged leaves me pretty cold. Who wants to be judged? It is a word we associate with some very unfortunate portraits of God that too many people embrace. Thomas Matthews, an American journalist writes:

"I still think of God — no, not think, but apprehend, as I was trained as a child to envision him — as a watchful, vengeful, enormous, omniscient policeman, instantly aware of the slightest tinge of irreverence in my innermost thought, always ready to pounce if I curse, if I mention him in anger, fun, or mere habit . . . but how can that kind of fear of that kind of God be the beginning of wisdom?"⁸

Yet, the need for there to be a final judge, who confronts and punishes those who do evil, beats strong in the human heart. We know that those who do the most terrible things do not always stand to account. We want them to be judged. If not in this life, then in the next.

When it comes to ourselves, of course, we recoil at the notion of standing to account for the lives we've lived. Yet the Bible is clear about this — we shall stand before the judge.

But look who it is!! We stand before the bar and discover that the judge is Jesus. What a relief. Then we look to our side and see that our advocate, our lawyer, is Jesus (1 John 2:1). Double relief. And then we realize that someone is tugging at our sleeve so we will step aside and let him stand in our place⁹ (2 Cor. 5:21). Who? Jesus! Relief beyond measure.

Many Christians find that they hold a view of God, even of God the Father, that lines up pretty well with that of Thomas Matthews. At a minimum, they think that is what the Old Testament teaches about God and they contrast it with Jesus, almost pitting Jesus against the "God of the Old Testament."

Yet, if Jesus is who we claim to be, fully and completely God (though not all of God), then how could Jesus be anything other than the full revelation of God. The problem lies in our poor and truncated reading of the Old Testament.

This simple phrase from the creed is a song of hope and joy. Yes, there will be judgment, as there must and should be, but the judge is Jesus. Could we imagine Jesus *not* judging with love and justice and mercy? When we profess to be Christians we are saying that we've placed our full faith and trust in Jesus Christ. Not only as our savior and redeemer, but as our judge and, indeed, the judge of all — the living and the dead. Amen to that!

Encounter

Wednesday evenings at 6:45 In Wesley Hall

The Cosmic, Crucified Christ: a study in Colossians

March 17: Keeping Faith

Does it seem at times that your life, your job, even your friends are pulling you away from Jesus? How do we stay faithful? Join us next Wednesday evening as we take a close look at Colossians 2:6 – 3:4.

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Heresy: Why it Matters What Christians Believe

This week, Mar 14, in Scott's 11:00 class: *Early Mistakes about Jesus!*

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What's Coming in April?

The 9:30 Teaching Service: *Resurrection Road*

Scott's 11:00 Sunday class: *A Case for the Crusades?*

Encounter (Wed evening): *The Story of the Exodus*

Beginning Tues., April 4: *A new weekly lunchtime brownbag in-depth Bible study with Scott Engle from 12:00 – 1:30, Room 127*

⁸Quoted in Terence Fretheim's book, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective*, Fortress Press, 1984.

⁹This is the substitutionary theory of the atonement, one of a variety of such images in Scripture about how we are made right with God. Many Protestants make the mistake of seeing this as pretty much the only image of atonement, rather than as one amongst several.