

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book is in some ways self-indulgent. Easter is one of my favourite times of the year and resurrection one of the pillars of my faith. Yet many years I find myself disappointed. We work our way through Lent, reflecting deeply on issues of life and faith and, at last, arrive at Easter Day, when so often we stop our study and carry on as before. Many people read Lent books, some of which explore Jesus' journey to the cross but then stop just before the resurrection or, occasionally, mention the resurrection in their last chapter. I have for many years longed for a book that would take me on a journey through Easter to Ascension Day and Pentecost, which would allow me to think more deeply and seriously about what the resurrection means to me and the way in which I live my life. (Such a book might also allow me to rectify the fact that I never did quite finish that Lent book I began six weeks ago!)

In the end, I decided that the only thing to do was to write my own Easter book, which could accompany me on a journey through the stories and ideas about resurrection we encounter in the Bible, and to ask what living a resurrection life might mean. So this book is largely self-indulgent, but I hope not entirely so. If you, like me, have wanted to travel more deeply into what Jesus' rising from the dead really means, then I hope this book might be a helpful companion on your journey.

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One of the challenges of writing an Easter book is how to apportion the chapters. Should Mark's Gospel get more or less space than Matthew's Gospel? How much room should Paul get? In the end, I decided to choose 42 passages which, if you opt to read this book between Easter and Pentecost, will give you six a week for seven weeks (one a day with one day off per week). You may of course not choose to read the book after Easter, or not solely after Easter, or not as a book of daily readings, and in that case you can decide for yourself what to read when.

You might like, before you begin, to decide how you want to go about considering the resurrection. One option is to follow the order I have put down (the resurrection in the Gospels, Paul, other Epistles, then the ascension, then Pentecost); another is to mix up the readings a bit more. If, for example, you know that you find the writings of Paul hard or, indeed, that you have a preference either for Paul's theology or the narratives of the Gospels, you might like to intersperse your readings from the Gospels with those from Paul. In this way you can reflect on the two side by side, which can be an interesting and helpful thing to do.

Most sections begin with a short passage from the New Testament which forms the basis of my reflection, with a suggestion for a longer passage, if you would like to read further. Occasionally there is only the short passage because the longer context has been explored in either the previous or the subsequent section (or both).

On putting things in and leaving things out

One of the greatest challenges of writing a book like this is not so much what to put in as what to leave out. I had covered most (though not all) of the Gospel narratives

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about resurrection but then faced the challenge of how to select passages from Paul, Acts and the rest of the New Testament for the sections on the resurrection in the Epistles, the ascension and Pentecost. In the end I chose what I think are the most important passages then halved them, then shaved off a few more, until I was left with the ones included in this book. If I wrote this book again I might make different choices (and no doubt many of you would have chosen different passages as well) and so I offer this selection as a snapshot of what I thought were helpful passages at the time of writing.

In a similar vein, there is much, much more to say about the passages than I have said here. In the end I restricted myself to one major focus (with a few exceptions) per passage. This will inevitably mean that I have missed some crucially important points – and maybe included others that you might not have put in. I did this consciously because my aim in writing this book is to produce a series of reflections that are more suggestive than conclusive, more thought-provoking than exhaustive. I don't want to have the last word (or anything approaching the last word) but to frame some initial thoughts that might help you find your own words about the resurrection and our life in Christ.

The alert reader will notice that I haven't anywhere discussed the question of the historicity of the resurrection. The reason for this is very simple – I don't think it's the most important question to ask. This may sound surprising and I don't intend it to be. What I mean is that in the latter half of the twentieth century this was one of the few questions ever asked about the resurrection. The result was an almost impossible stand-off between those who said yes, it was historical, and those who said it wasn't, which, over time, led to a discomfort with talking about the resurrection at all. There is very little that can be

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added to the debate about historicity. The resurrection cannot be proved to be historical, but it would also be hard to disprove it. What we can do, however, is to ask what it *meant* to the earliest Christians and also what it might mean to us today. This is the major focus of my reflections in this book. If you wish to reflect further on questions of historicity, then you will need to look elsewhere and after the introduction I have made suggestions of a few books for further reading that might help you if you are interested in this area.

In a similar vein, I have also opted to take belief about the end times at face value. Although many Christians today prefer not to talk about the end of the world, perhaps because it seems so distant and unlikely, the New Testament writers were adamant in their belief that it would happen. We can only really understand resurrection if we also assume a belief in the end times. Remove the end of the world and much New Testament theology becomes illogical. Whatever your own beliefs on the subject, we have to take a step into the New Testament writers' world in order to comprehend what they were talking about. Part of that world was believing in the end times, and we need to assume this outlook if we wish to talk about how the New Testament writers understood the resurrection.

Some main features of New Testament scholarship that I have also opted not to discuss in this book are questions of authorship, date and purpose of writing. These are vital questions but, in my view, are ground-clearing or foundational questions which allow us to ask both what the texts meant then and what they mean now. In study books on the New Testament, it can happen that these 'pre' questions are asked in full and then the process of interpretation stops before questions of meaning are raised. In this book I have decided to cut out most

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of the ‘pre’ questions (since these are widely, and well asked elsewhere) and to concentrate instead on the questions of meaning. As a result, I shall refer to Mark as the author of Mark’s Gospel and John and the author of the fourth Gospel – and so on – not because I am unaware of the issues surrounding authorship but because I am using this as shorthand in order to get us more quickly to the text itself. This also holds true of the Epistles. I am fully aware of debates about the authorship of Colossians and Ephesians, or of 1 Peter, but this book does not aim to adjudicate on who wrote what, when and where. If I began to do that then we would have little time to explore the resurrection. The only exception to this rule is the book of Hebrews which, though attributed to Paul in Christian tradition, mentions no author in the book itself. As the author remains anonymous in Hebrews, I shall treat him as anonymous here too.

I will also be talking about the different Gospel accounts of resurrection (calling them Mark’s account, Matthew’s account and so on). This is not meant to imply that Mark made his version up, or that Matthew is playing fast and loose with the details. All it recognizes is that the intricate art of weaving together a narrative, reflecting on it and drawing our attention to its significance is a task that each Gospel writer did differently and with different results. Again, questions of how their accounts relate to what actually happened are not our concern in this book.

Resurrection: A reflection

One of the challenges for understanding the resurrection is working out what resurrection meant to a first-century Jewish audience and how this should affect the way in which we think about it today. In order to help you to

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think about this further I have written an extended reflection on resurrection, what it meant, what it means and how that affects the way in which we live out our lives. Some people will find it to be a helpful lens through which to read the reflections on individual passages; others may find it overly complex and theological. Again, how – or whether – you read it is up to you. If you would rather get into the exploration of the biblical stories straight away then do that and skip the introduction entirely. You can of course read it later – or indeed not at all – if that is more helpful.

The R. S. Thomas poem that begins the Introduction also functions as a different kind of lens through which we can read the accounts and descriptions of resurrection. My theological musings provide one kind of lens but the poem ‘Suddenly’ provides another, inner lens, which helps us to see this risen Christ whom we worship not with our eyes only but with the whole of our being.