Easter is not primarily a comfort, but a challenge. Its message is either the supreme fact in history or else a gigantic hoax. This seems to have been realized in the days of the early Church. On the one side there was a little company of men and women who turned the world upside down by their passionate proclamation of that miracle which had transformed their lives: on the other, those who vehemently denounced the whole story as arrant blasphemy. We ourselves find it hard to see the issue so clear-cut, for ours is a tolerant age and one suspicious of all fanaticism. Most people have not the slightest desire to attack the Easter message; and yet they only half believe it. To them it is a beautiful story, full of spiritual meaning: why worry, then, whether it is literal fact?

But we miss the point. Either it is infinitely more than a beautiful story, or else it is infinitely less. If it is true, then it is the supreme fact of history; and to fail to adjust one's life to its implications means irreparable loss. But if it is not true, if Christ be not risen, then the whole of Christianity is a fraud, foisted on the world by a company of consummate liars, or, at best, deluded simpletons. St. Paul himself realized this when he wrote, 'If Christ be not risen, then is our preaching meaningless, and your faith worthless. More, we ourselves are found to be false witnesses'.

So that is the issue, and it is vital for us to come to a decision about it one way or the other. But how can we, when it all happened so long ago? How can we sift the evidence?

This is not really quite so impracticable as it sounds, for there are at least two ways of setting about it. We can examine the historical evidence and try to determine whether it is contemporary, honest and convincing, and whether it is susceptible to any naturalistic interpretation. Alternatively, or in addition, we can apply the test of experience, and put the risen Christ to the proof in our own lives and those of others. In this paper we are primarily concerned with the first of these alternatives.

On what documents, then, is the Easter story based? Primarily, on the written testimony of six witnesses (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul and Peter), supported by the testimony of the whole primitive Church.

Now it is not sufficiently realized what strides modern research has made in determining the date and authorship of these written records. In the nineteenth century a number of unbelievers, equipped with considerable scholarship, made the most strenuous efforts to prove that the Gospels were written in the middle of the second century, A.D. (or about a hundred years after the events described), when legend and imagination could have played their part. But this attempt has failed, crushed under the weight of historical proof which grows in strength with the passage of the years.

The written testimony, then, is extraordinarily early. Let us concentrate attention on three examples.

(1) *Paul*, in the fifteenth chapter of his Epistle to the Corinthians, gives a detailed list of several resurrection appearances. Now there is scarcely a scholar who has doubted the genuineness of 1 Corinthians, and its date is generally accepted as about 56 A.D. But the apostle writes that he had not only previously given his readers this information orally (i.e., in 49 A.D.), but had himself 'received' it, presumably from those who were apostles before him. This may take us back to 40 A.D. or to within some ten
years of the crucifixion.

(2) *Mark*, in his Gospel, gives us another account of the resurrection appearances, preceded by the story of the empty tomb. Now it is generally accepted that Mark's Gospel represents Peter's oral teaching, and that it was written at a very early date. Some modern scholars believe that an Aramaic version was in existence as early as 44 A.D.

(3) *Luke* is our third witness, and he adds considerably to our knowledge both of the visit to the tomb and of the subsequent appearances, as well as providing the fullest account we have of the early apostolic preaching. And not only have the third Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles been widely accepted as the genuine composition of Luke, the 'beloved physician', but Sir William Ramsay and others have shown how minutely accurate an historian he was.

Such, then, are our first three witnesses, selected because their testimony is such as no unbiased critic can disregard, either from the point of view of authorship or early date. But we must also remember the testimony of Matthew, John and Peter, equally authoritative as we believe it to be.

Now what of this evidence? It is certainly extremely early, much of it going back to the very first decade of the Christian era. This means it is contemporary, and must be accepted, at the least, as substantially the record of eye-witnesses. How, then, can we avoid its implications? A number of different attempts have been made, the leading examples of which we shall now briefly examine.

The most radical theory of all is to dismiss the whole story as *deliberate invention*. But there is scarcely a single intelligent critic who would go so far. The adverse evidence is overwhelming. Think, first, of the number of witnesses. Paul tells us that in 56 A.D. the majority of some 500 original witnesses were still alive; and we must remember that most of the early records went out, as it were, with the collective authority of the primitive Church. Think, too, of the character of the witnesses. Not only did they give the world the highest moral and ethical teaching it has ever known, but they lived it out, as even their opponents were forced to admit. Again, think of the phenomenal change which these men underwent because of this alleged invention. Is it conceivable that a deliberate lie would change a company of cowards into heroes, and inspire them to a life of sacrifice, often ending only in martyrdom? Surely psychology teaches that nothing makes a man more prone to cowardice than a lie which preys on his conscience? Is it likely, moreover, that even in disillusionment or agony not a single one of these conspirators would ever have divulged the secret?

Others would use a somewhat kinder term and describe the accounts as *legends*. But this is equally impossible, for we have already seen that the records were too early to allow time for their growth: 'legends' put in circulation and recorded by the original eye-witnesses are scarcely distinguishable from deliberate inventions. But besides the reasons we have already seen for rejecting this suggestion, the intrinsic evidence of the stories themselves emphatically contradicts the theory. Such episodes as legend-mongers could scarcely resist describing (such as the scene of the resurrection itself, or an appearance of Christ to confound His enemies) are conspicuous by their absence - as is also any attempt to describe His appearance to James and others. What forger, moreover, would depict the first appearance as being granted to Mary Magdalene, a woman of no great standing in the Church? Would he not rather give this honour to Peter, or to John the beloved, or to Mary the Lord's own mother? Who, too, can read the story of the walk to Emmaus, or of the appearance to the Magdalene, or of Peter and John running to the tomb, without being profoundly conscious that these are no legends? The accounts are too dignified and restrained, the details too true to life. Finally, both these theories break down hopelessly before the fact of the empty tomb.

Very few scholars have any use for the above theories. On the contrary, the only rationalistic interpreta-
tions of any weight are such as admit the sincerity of the records but try to explain them without re-
course to the miraculous. All such attempts, moreover, are characterized by a sharp distinction between
the records of the visits to the tomb and the records of the actual appearances: first the former are ex-
plained in a variety of ingenious ways, and then the latter are regarded as psychological or psychic phe-
nomena.

First, then, we must deal with the records of the tomb.

(1) The earliest explanation of the empty tomb was that the disciples stole the body. 5 This, however, has
now been completely abandoned. The suggestion is impossible both psychologically and ethically. The
disciples were not the sort of people who could have carried through such an enterprise, by any stretch
of imagination: nor can such a deliberate fraud be reconciled with their characters and subsequent be-
haviour. Even if a few had originally acted alone it is inconceivable that they would never have told the
others. Is it reasonable to suppose, moreover, that none of them, even under torture or at martyrdom,
would ever have 'split'; that no whisper of any such rumour from within the Church would ever have
come down to us?

(2) More feasible is the suggestion that either the authorities, Jewish or Roman, or else Joseph of Ari-
mathea, removed the body. But why? The more one studies the possible reasons put forward for this re-
moval, together with the suggested occasions and circumstances, the less likely they appear. But there
is a far more decisive consideration. If the authorities moved the body why did they not say so and nip
the preaching of the resurrection in the bud? It must be remembered that within seven weeks Jerusalem
was seething with this preaching, and that not only did the authorities long to crush this dangerous her-
esy, but they even complained that the apostles were seeking to 'bring this man's blood upon us'. 6 They
were publicly accused of nothing less than denying the Holy One and the Just and killing the Prince of
Life. 7 Why, then, did not the High Priest make a solemn declaration that the body had been moved at
his own orders, or on instructions from the Romans? Why did the authorities not call as witnesses those
who had taken part in the removal? Why did they not indicate the true grave, or, in the last resource,
produce its mouldering remains? Why, instead, this feeble story about the disciples?

As for Joseph of Arimathea, the critic must clearly make up his mind whether to accept the Gospel
statement that he was a secret disciple who provided the tomb out of reverence for his Master 8 or
whether to accept the alternative suggestion that he was a pious Jew, anxious to ensure the interment of
the body (but why that body only, as it seems?) before the Sabbath. On the former view it seems most
unlikely he would ever have wanted to move the body at all and incredible that he would not have in-
formed the apostles if he had in fact done so — which brings us back to the theory of deception dis-
cussed in (1) above. On the alternative view it is equally unlikely that he would have acted without the
prior knowledge of the authorities and inconceivable that he would not have informed them subse-
quently, when Jerusalem was ringing with the preaching of the resurrection: and this brings us back to
the objection already discussed in this section.

(3) Another suggestion is that the women mistook the tomb. Comparative strangers to Jerusalem, and
coming in the uncertain light of early morning, they missed their way; but a young man who was lurk-
ing around realized their purpose and said, 'Ye seek Jesus... He is not here... Behold (pointing to an-
other tomb) the place where they laid Him'. But the women were terrified and ran away: and they sub-
sequently came to believe that the young man must have been an angel and his words an announcement
that their Lord had risen from the dead.

This is very ingenious; although it involves, of course, arbitrarily omitting the phrase, 'He is risen',
from the middle of the young man's words. It is significant, however, that even the leading protagonists
of this theory realize that it is not so easy as all that, and feel forced to introduce complications. They commonly inform us, for instance, that the women, when they fled from the tomb, did not immediately inform the apostles of what had happened, for otherwise why did not the latter either check up on the facts or begin to preach the resurrection at once, without that seven weeks' delay? This lack of contact between the women and the apostles they then proceed to explain by the assumption that all the latter had already fled from Jerusalem to Galilee, whence they did not return until some three weeks later with the account of the Galilean appearances. Only then did the women tell the story of their visit to the tomb: and the apostles, obsessed by the mystic or psychic experiences they had themselves enjoyed, proceeded to put two and two together and make at least five.

But why should all the apostles have fled so soon? No doubt Jerusalem was somewhat unhealthy for them just then, but why in that case should they leave all their womenfolk behind? Surely such an action would be more than ordinarily cowardly and unchivalrous? And why, anyway, did not the women follow? Why did they stay alone for three long weeks, contrary to their usual custom, in what were apparently regarded as dangerous circumstances? It is all very difficult and obscure.

And this theory finally breaks down just where the former did. Why, if such were the facts, did not the priests produce this young man and explode the whole delusion? Why, again, did they not point to the true tomb, or produce the body itself? Why, too, do we hear no whisper in antiquity of any other possible tomb as a place of pilgrimage or reverence? There seems only one answer. It was because all, friends and enemies alike, knew the true tomb and knew that it was empty.

(4) There is one more suggested explanation of the phenomena. This was first propounded by Venturini at the end of the eighteenth century, and may be expressed somewhat as follows. We read in the Gospels that Christ was reported to be dead somewhat sooner than was usual in such cases: it apparently surprised Pilate that He was 'dead already'. In reality, of course, He was not dead, but had only swooned from exhaustion, caused by the agony of crucifixion and loss of blood. It was in this condition that He was buried: but the cool restfulness of the tomb revived Him, and He issued forth and showed Himself to His disciples. These ignorant men, however, believed that He was risen from the dead.

This again sounds ingenious, but is quite untenable. To begin with, the early accounts are emphatic about the fact of His death: the Romans, the Jews, and the disciples would all be concerned. Among all the insinuations against Christianity that have come down from antiquity, no whisper of this sort has ever been heard.

But let us postulate for a moment that Christ was in fact so buried - swooning from sheer exhaustion. We are then, presumably, asked to believe that three days in a cold tomb, without food and attention, would so far revive Him that, instead of proving the inevitable finale to His flickering life, He was able to set Himself free from the spice-laden grave clothes which swathed Him round, roll away a stone which three women felt unable to tackle, terrify the Roman guards, and walk miles on pierced and wounded feet? On this point let us listen to the sceptic Strauss: 'It is impossible that a being who had stolen half-dead out of the sepulchre, who crept about weak and ill, wanting medical treatment, who required bandaging, strengthening, and indulgence, and who still at last yielded to his sufferings, could have given the disciples the impression that he was a conqueror over death and the grave, the Prince of Life: an impression which lay at the bottom of their future ministry. Such a resuscitation could… by no possibility have changed their sorrow into enthusiasm, have elevated their reverence into worship'.

More, such a Christ would Himself have been a party to a gross deception; and this, we imagine, no intelligent critic would suggest.

Three further points concerning the tomb remain to be noticed.
(1) Why do we find no mention of the women's story in the early apostolic preaching, as recorded in the book of the Acts and some of the Epistles? Peter and the others insisted repeatedly in their apologetic and evangelistic preaching on the fact of the resurrection: that it was a fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy; that it proved the One so raised to have been sent of God and to be now exalted as a Prince and a Saviour; that they themselves were eye-witnesses of what they said. But we find no reference whatever to the tomb in all their public preaching: only in those records, the Gospels, which were written for the instruction of the new converts who came flocking into the Church, are the stories found. Surely there can be only one explanation of this singular omission: that the fact of the empty tomb was common knowledge, on which no insistence was necessary; the only controversy concerned not the facts but their explanation. It was upon this alone, then, that the apostles concentrated.

(2) How can we explain the complete disregard with which the tomb seems to have been treated in apostolic days? There is no evidence that it became a place of pilgrimage, or even of reverence and interest. Even if this is understandable on the part of the little band of men and women who were convinced believers in the resurrection, what of all that multitude of Jews who, while not professed Christians, must have been profoundly influenced by the Galilean prophet, and some of whom had even felt His healing touch?

(3) The phrase repeatedly used above, the empty tomb, is not strictly accurate. In a passage so vivid yet restrained that it bears the hallmark of the account of an eye witness, the fourth Gospel records the visit of Peter and John to the tomb. 'So Peter set out, and the other disciple; and they were coming to the tomb; and they began to run, the two of them together; and the other disciple ran on in front, quicker than Peter, and came first to the tomb and, peeping in, seeth lying there the linen clothes, yet he did not go in. So Simon Peter cometh also, following him, and went into the tomb; he taketh note of the linen clothes lying, and the napkin, which was on His head, not lying with the linen clothes but apart, wrapped into one place. So the other disciple also went in - he who came first to the tomb - and saw and believed'.

The empty tomb, then, forms a veritable rock on which all rationalistic theories of the resurrection dash themselves in vain.

But neither can the actual appearances of the risen Lord be ignored or explained away. We have already seen that they cannot be discarded as lies or legends, but were reported by eye-witnesses who were profoundly convinced of their truth. So much is generally admitted by all competent scholars. How, then, can their implication be avoided? The only feasible suggestion seems to be that they were some form of hallucination, of pathological or psychic phenomena.

But modern medicine has shown that even psychological phenomena obey certain laws and may be subjected to certain tests. Let us, then, look more closely at these phenomena in the light of some of these principles.

(1) Only certain types of persons are normally liable to such experiences - the more highly-strung and imaginative types. But here on one occasion a crowd of five hundred people all claimed these hallucinations, and smaller numbers made that claim on a number of different occasions. And not only did this company include a possibly psychic Mary Magdalene, but a hard-headed tax collector, a number of prosaic fishermen, and persons of a wide variety of dispositions.

(2) Hallucinations, again, are highly individualistic, for their true source is the subconscious mind of
the recipient. No two persons, therefore, will experience exactly the same phenomena. But here the five hundred all claimed to have experienced exactly the same hallucinations, at one and the same time and place. And exactly similar hallucinations were experienced by other companies of several persons together.

(3) Such phenomena, too, usually concern some expected event, long meditated and desired. A lonely mother, for instance, may have so longed for the return of her runaway son that she believes she actually sees him. But everything goes to show that the disciples were not expecting these appearances: they were sad and defeated, and hope seemed to have died.

(4) Psychic experiences, again, usually occur at suitable times and places: the evening, night or early morning, for instance, and in characteristic surroundings. But these hallucinations happened at all sorts of times and places: an upper room at evening; the tomb in the early morning; an afternoon's walk in the country; a morning's fishing on the lake; a mountain in Galilee.

(5) Finally, such obsessions usually recur over a long period with some degree of regularity, either increasing or decreasing in frequency as time goes by. But all the phenomena we are considering occurred during a short period of forty days and then stopped for ever. And not one of the subjects ever again claimed to have experienced a single repetition.

Nor can these phenomena be explained by the alleged results of modern spiritualism, for several of the necessary conditions seem to have been absent. The resurrection appearances were clearly not dependent on the presence of any one medium, nor on any group of seekers after the supernatural, nor yet on any other ascertainable conditions. The One who appeared, moreover, was no mere spirit-emanation. He could be clearly seen and distinctly heard; He could be touched and handled; He could walk into the country, cook fish, and even eat it; and the marks of His suffering could be seen and felt.

The more carefully the point is studied, the more impossible does it seem to explain these appearances as any form of hallucination. Nor will any theory suffice which attempts to explain the phenomena as a mere survival of the Spirit of Jesus. The point at issue is something far more definite. The records are unanimous that His deathless Spirit returned to His mutilated human body which was instantly and miraculously changed into a new and spiritual body, different indeed from His mortal flesh and blood, but recognizable none the less.

Much more could be said, although it can be summarized here only in barest outline.

(1) A great company exists in every quarter of the world called the Christian Church. This company or association can be traced back in history to Palestine in the year 30 A.D. (circa). To what did it owe its origin? Its papers of association clearly state that its origin dates from the resurrection of its Founder from the tomb. What other suggestion covers the facts?

(2) There is the institution of the Christian Sunday - which can also be traced back to much the same place and date. To what does this owe its inception? The Jews were fanatically attached to their Sabbath, and the early Church was almost exclusively Jewish. It must have required some event of the deepest and most startling significance to make them change to the first day of the week. It did: it was nothing less than the resurrection. And the same line of reasoning can be applied to the festival of Easter.

(3) What, too, of the success of the early Church? The very substance and basis of the apostolic preaching was the resurrection, preached within a few minutes' walk of Joseph's tomb. How then can we explain the thousands who believed - in spite of fierce opposition - and the large number of priests who
'became obedient to the faith'? The answer seems decisive: because the basic fact of the empty tomb was incontrovertible.

(4) How, again, can we explain that awkward interval of seven weeks between the event and its first proclamation? No fabricator of false evidence nor dreamer of dreams would so arrange the story. The only adequate explanation of this interval is that provided by the records themselves: that the disciples spent the first forty days in intermittent fellowship with their risen Lord, and the next ten in waiting, at His command, for the 'promise of the Father' that they would be endued with power.

(5) Again, it seems incontrovertible that Christ Himself foretold His crucifixion and resurrection. Even if the critic should try to explain the definiteness of some of the predictions as ex post facto reminiscences, the accusation at His trial that He had said, 'I am able to destroy this temple of God, and to build it in three days', can scarcely have been other than a mutilated version of a prediction of His passion and resurrection.

(6) What, too, of the apostles themselves? What can have changed a little company of sad and defeated cowards into a band of irresistible missionaries who turned the world upside down and whom no opposition could deter? What changed Peter from a weakling who denied his Lord before a servant girl's questionings into a man who could not be silenced by the whole Sanhedrin? Paul and the evangelists give us part of the explanation: 'He appeared unto Peter'. What changed James, the Lord's human and by no means sympathetic brother, into the acknowledged leader of the Jerusalem Church, all in the space of a few short years? We are told, 'He appeared unto James'. What else would have induced this erstwhile critic to write his Brother as 'the Lord of glory'?

(7) And what of Christian experience all down the ages? There is a positive multitude of men and women, high and low, learned and ignorant, civilized and savage, reprobate and respectable, who have found in the risen, living Christ their salvation and their joy. And their transformed lives have testified to the reality of their experience.

(8) Finally, what of the One who rose? It may indeed be objected by some critic that a resurrection from the dead is so incredible that no amount of evidence would suffice. Such an attitude seems prejudiced and unscientific, but let that pass. Let us assume that the resurrection of an ordinary man is indeed incredible. But such a line of reasoning cannot apply to the One whom we are considering. He was unique in all He did; in all He said; in all He was. Whichever way one looks at Him, He is in a class by Himself. Even apart from the resurrection, there are excellent and convincing reasons for believing that He was 'God manifest in the flesh'. Is it, then, so incredible that such a One should rise from the dead? It would have been far more incredible if He had not. It is, indeed, the profoundest of mysteries that He should ever have died 'for us men and for our salvation': but, having died, it is no mystery that He should have risen.

But the ultimate proof of the resurrection for each individual lies in his own knowledge of the risen Christ, for in this matter the evidence of experience can supplement that of history. Happily the promise of the risen Saviour still stands: 'Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me'.

Footnotes:

1. 1 Cor. xv. 14, 15.
2. 1 Cor. xv. 3-7.
3. See Gal. i. 18, 19.
4. The author is here concerned to take nothing for granted, although he himself fully accepts the divine inspiration of these records.
5. Mt. xxviii. 11-15.
8. Mt. xxvii. 57ff.
9. Mk. xv. 44.
10. From Dr. Temple's Readings in St. John, p. 376.
11. Lk. xxiv. 39.
12. Lk. xxiv. 15.
14. Lk. xxiv. 41-43.
15. Jn. xx. 27.
17. Acts i. 3.
18. Acts i. 4-8.
19. Mt. xxvi. 61.
20. 1 Cor. xv. 5; Lk. xxiv. 34.
21. 1 Cor. xv. 7.
22. Jas. ii. 1.
23. Rev. iii. 20.

END

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