



An Imaginative Applied Scientist Considers the Resurrection

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I appreciate the nuance of the label “[Confessing Scientist](#)” introduced here at *Peaceful Science*. One can identify simultaneously with a vocation in science and a confession of traditional Christian beliefs without immediately (or ever) committing to a particular model of creation. To my mind, the name also avoids implying that Christians necessarily make different scientific inferences. I only hesitate to apply it to myself because I don’t know if I get to call myself a scientist. That might sound self-deprecating, but I hope it will become clear why I think it’s worth raising the question.

I have the credentials and training of a scientist: a PhD nominally in Molecular Microbiology and Immunology, although my thesis strayed more towards biostatistics, followed by a postdoctoral fellowship in computational biology. From there, I took a position at a public health software company, where I am currently the Chief Science Officer, a title which deliberately manages to suggest corporate functionary, scientist, and Starfleet academic all at once. What I actually do involves techniques developed via mathematical reasoning and the scientific method. I can talk about my work in scientific terms like machine learning or natural language processing and describe some of it in equations. But mostly I feel more like a technician who applies tools rather than a scientist doing original research.

I mention all of this because I think ambiguity about what is scientific is also relevant when we talk about the resurrection of Jesus. To some, believing a human died and came back to life seems counter to science, because there is no scientific evidence for it. At which point we can ask, is the Resurrection even a scientific question?

Scientific Inquiry into the Resurrection

We can certainly phrase the question in scientific terms. Thanks to my biology education I can come up with all sorts of specific questions, for example: Did the risen Jesus have a body made from the same molecules as his pre-crucifixion body? Were his individual cells protected from biochemical degradation? Did his body decay after death, only to have those biochemical processes reversed? Or were his cells reconstructed from new materials?

Andy Walsh is the author of *Faith Across The Multiverse*, a surprising, playful, and deep book about parables in science. We recommend the book, of course, and are pleased to see this confession from an imaginative computational biologist.

I also wonder about Jesus’s [microbiome](#), a community of microorganisms that lives on one’s body and is necessary for health. Did his risen body have a microbiome? Were these microorganisms resurrected alongside this body too? Or did Jesus’ resurrected body go through some kind of recolonization process to establish a new microbiome?

What about the functions of Jesus’s new body? Was his post-resurrection DNA replication machinery capable of functioning with 100% accuracy, avoiding mutation-related concerns like cancer?

Even further, we can imagine how we would study Jesus’ resurrection were it to happen tomorrow. Or, if we are feeling very imaginative, we can suppose time travel to first century Jerusalem. In those scenarios, we could apply a variety of biochemical and biomedical technologies to study all these sorts of questions.

Thanks to [CSI](#), many of us are familiar with comparing DNA, tissue samples and dental records from pre- and post-mortem, or in this case *post-post-mortem*. In doing so we might become more (or less) confident that physical death occurred and that a biological identity was preserved across that death. We might even be able to understand something of the mechanism by which resurrection was achieved, presuming it could be described in terms of physical processes. Thus, we can imagine fictional circumstances under which resurrection could have been studied with the tools of science.

And so Jesus’ resurrection may seem like a matter of science. In actual particulars, however, there is no physical evidence available to observe or investigate, placing it outside the scope or application of science.

Why I Believe Beyond Science

So why do I believe in the resurrection? Not all evidence is physical. On this blog, physicist [Daniel Ang](#) and biologist [Zachery Arden](#) have written helpful reviews on the historical evidence for the Resurrection, including the testimony of the Gospel writers, Paul, and the other eyewitnesses they cite. I recognize that such evidence will always leave room for skepticism, and if you did not find their discussion compelling I doubt I can add anything that will persuade you otherwise. Nevertheless, I find this evidence compelling, and it represents the primary reason I believe in the resurrection.

Still, the witness of history is not the only reason; there is also evidence of a sort that I can observe on an ongoing basis. For

example, I believe in the resurrection because I go to church on Sunday.

Perhaps that sounds backwards to you; surely I mean that I go to church on Sunday because I believe in the Resurrection. True, I *go to church* because of my beliefs, but I believe (in part) because I go *on Sunday*.

Jesus and his earliest followers were all Jews whose Sabbath observances centered on Saturday. That practice is codified in the 10 commandments, and harkens back to the rhythm of God's creative acts. According to [Acts 15](#), some of those same Jewish followers were reluctant to disconnect their new teaching from the ancient practice of circumcision. Yet they were all united in their conviction to reorient their regular worship practice around Sunday. Recognizing a return to life from death as evidence of the Godhood of the man Jesus strikes me as a suitably weighty explanation for that substantial shift.

With that shift comes a reaffirmation of the broad scope of creation. We are reminded that God's creative activity is not just located in the past. God continues to create in the present, and we look forward to his new creation in the future. The resurrected Jesus was a preview of things to come.

Confessing Scientists and other Confessing Followers of Jesus may differ on models of creation, but we can affirm a common doctrine of creation. Physical reality came into being in response to God's words. God continues to speak to his creation; created things accept or decline that call, moment to moment. His call has a purpose beyond mere existence, a purpose we look forward to seeing fully realized in days yet to come.

I Want to Believe

I want to be a part of realizing that purpose. I want to see the place where God is calling us. I believe because I *want* to believe. Now, that opens up an entirely different set of answers to the question of why I believe in the Resurrection.

The psychological reality of being human means we believe all sorts of things for all sorts of reasons independent of whether those beliefs are true and of whether we can set forth a rigorous chain of reasoning supporting those beliefs. I think it is important to believe in true things, and I believe it is true that Jesus rose from the dead. I think it is important to have good reasons for believing true things, and I think there are good reasons for believing Jesus rose from the dead, including the documentary evidence and the present day reality of

two day weekends. I also think it is important to be aware of the psychology and sociology of our beliefs.

In that spirit, certainly the fact that I was born into a Western culture shaped by Christian influences, and more specifically into a Christian family, is relevant. I was provided the opportunity to read about Jesus' resurrection in the Gospels. It is culturally and socially easy for me to not only learn about but also confess belief in that event. Such a confession allows me to retain a feature of my identity and to remain a part of certain social groups which inform that identity. I or humans in general might have additional cognitive biases that predispose me or us towards religious belief more broadly, which also facilitates specific belief in the resurrection.

At the same time, none of those factors negate the possibility that Jesus actually did rise from the dead; they operate largely independent of truth.

And in my case, I don't think these factors offer a full explanation of my belief either. While I identify as Christian, I recognize that my identity is mutable. After all, I have become comfortable with ambiguity about my identity as a scientist, and I would have considered that similarly central to who I think I am. I am also reasonably confident that changing my beliefs would not incur a prohibitive social cost; some relationships would be strained, while others would be strengthened by greater commonality. To be sure, changing my beliefs would not come lightly; I'm simply pointing out that I am not holding onto my beliefs because I cannot see a path to any other options. Nor am I holding on to my beliefs because I have kept myself ignorant of other religions or the reasons why some choose not to believe any religion.

Thus, I do not believe that my belief in the resurrection of Jesus is merely a cultural or psychological default.

Still, I could be wrong about my self-assessment. And I could be wrong about the evidence. I doubt I will ever be able to eliminate all uncertainty. However much uncertainty remains I give over to my desire to believe.

I am interested in what (fictional comic book character) [Hank Pym](#) calls the infinite game, a game you play to continue playing, "[trying to make each day better than the one before. Forever.](#)" Following Jesus even through death and out the other side promises such an opportunity. Infinite games may not be for everyone. But they are more fun together, and so I hope to have the privilege to play alongside you.

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