



Writings of W. Burney Overton

Burney's Papers

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I, Too, Am Alive

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Paper No. 2, “The Awesome Freedom of a Child of God”, of Burney’s Papers for 1993 was in the works and due to be finished any day.

And then something happened.

It was the Easter Season, 1993. I attended some worship services. Triggered by them, I had some conversations and then some thoughts about the conversations. Suddenly, a new paper came into being that had to take precedence over the one chosen for No. 2. Thanks to the wonders of the computer, nothing is lost on the paper that was to be No. 2. I just change it to No. 3, and it has its new place.

In this manner, “I, Too, Am Alive” was born.

“He is not here. He is alive.” So said the women who went to the tomb of Jesus early on the first day of the week following his crucifixion. According to their stories, they had had a most unusual experience. When they got to the tomb, they were astonished to discover that Jesus – Jesus’ body – wasn’t there. And a messenger from heaven was there who assured them that Jesus was alive – that he was not to be found in a tomb.

These were strange words – strange words, indeed. Were they to be believed? In any case, the tomb, so it appeared to them, was empty. There seemed nothing to do but to follow the instructions of the heavenly messenger and go to the disciples with their stories – strange though they seemed to be.

And, according to the accounts we have in Scripture, when the women came to the disciples with their stories, they regarded what the women told them about the empty tomb and about Jesus being alive as “idle tales”. Small wonder. Idle tales or not, their stories were pretty unbelievable. Nothing in the experience of the disciples gave them any reason to believe it.

Even so, since that time, the focus of the Easter message has been on the empty tomb, the resurrection of Jesus, and his victory over death. In fact, the message of his resurrection is central to the Christian faith as we proclaim it today.

All things considered, it isn’t surprising that the disciples at first regarded all this that the women were telling about an empty tomb and Jesus being alive as “idle tales”. They had lived with Jesus, shared with him, listened to him, observed him, entered into discussion with him. But they had not really “bought” his philosophy, nor his outlook on life. After all, both went contrary to any prior teachings or understanding to which they had been conditioned. How could they regard the women’s stories as anything other than “idle tales”? Nothing in their experience allowed them to think otherwise.

The disciples’ behavior at the time Jesus was arrested bears out that they had not really “bought” his philosophy and outlook on life. They clearly believed that their first priority was to preserve themselves at any cost. In the face of the ominous show of

power of the temple guards, and the threat of Jesus, they saw no other option but to run away from the place of danger.

Subsequent events sharpened the disciples' fear. All they hoped was true about Jesus proved not to be. From afar, they watched – or, at least, kept in touch with – what was happening. Jesus falsely tried. Jesus mocked and scourged. Jesus the criminal. Jesus condemned to death on a cross. It was not safe to be known as a follower of Jesus. Everything they had dreamed and hoped for from Jesus was wiped out, and the task remaining to them was to avoid detection at all cost, and, at least, to stay alive.

The disciples had neither understood, nor bought Jesus' philosophy and outlook on life. They even had tried to persuade him to change his tactics and protect himself from the wrath of the leaders of the Jews – to no avail.

And that he could be alive after they had seen him die on a cross was unthinkable and unbelievable. The stories of the women had to be “idle tales”. There had to be another explanation than that their stories were true.

Maybe the explanation was that the women were profoundly shocked by Jesus' death – as, indeed, were the disciples – and that their emotional distress was so deep that they could only deny the crucifixion events. Maybe their feelings of loss and grief were so intense that they simply could not accept the fact of his death. Maybe they had to figure out a way to convince themselves that he was not dead, but still alive, and so they came up with these quite unbelievable stories.

Yes, that was it. The women were so grief-stricken that they had to believe that Jesus really was still alive. In time, they would realize that they were wrong. Sooner or later, they would get over their grief and accept the reality that he was dead.

The disciples, of course, saw themselves as more realistic than the women. After all, they had been in the Garden when Jesus was arrested. They saw what was happening. They knew how serious the situation was. So, quite understandably, they responded by fleeing in terror, hiding themselves, and remaining hidden until the trial and crucifixion were over, lest they, too, be brought to trial and be crucified.

The women had never been in any real danger, but the disciples had been – still were – and they had done what they knew to do to stay alive.

Because the disciples believed they were still in great danger, they continued to be afraid and to hide – they, and many of the others who had been with Jesus.

The stories of the women turned out not to be the end of the story for the disciples. Things happened that were even more astonishing than their stories. Some of them went to the tomb where Jesus had been laid, and, as was the case with the women earlier, they found it empty.

Other stories of encounters with Jesus continued to surface over the next weeks. Two men, on the road to Emmaus, walked with Jesus but did not recognize him until he broke bread with them at their evening meal.

More than once, when the disciples and other followers were hidden away in an upper room with the door heavily barred, they perceived that Jesus was in their midst. At first, Thomas doubted that it was Jesus, and then he, too, dared to believe.

However, none of the disciples seemed to know what to do about the stories – or their experiences – of Jesus’ resurrection and his “appearances” in their midst. In fact, Peter and the other fishermen among the disciples decided to go back to their old profession. With their hope gone that anything could come of their involvement with Jesus, and seeing nothing to do with the information that he was alive, they saw no alternative but to go back to the life they had known.

It was after a fruitless night of fishing that Peter and the others had yet another experience of Jesus alive, and known to them in the breaking of bread at a breakfast he had prepared for them on the shore of the sea. But still they seemed to have no idea about what to do. It might even be accurate to describe them as being dead. Certainly, there was no indication that their outlook on life had changed, nor that they had any more understanding of what Jesus was about than they had had before his crucifixion.

Then came the Pentecostal experience.

The words of Scripture are: “Suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of the mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit...” (Acts 2:2-4a)

That day, the lives of the disciples were changed forever. That day – whatever had happened – they bought Jesus’ philosophy and way of life. That day, they discovered a new goal to pursue, and, with it, a singleness of purpose and an intensity about pursuing it greater than any they had ever known. That day, they became alive, and Jesus was truly alive for them.

Maybe the experience of the disciples on the Day of Pentecost became the truly significant resurrection experience. Maybe, in a manner of speaking, this is what the resurrection story is all about. It isn’t so much that, that day, they became followers of Jesus. It is that, that day, they embraced what he believed, taught, stood for, lived for, and died for. It is that, that day, they, too, were alive as Jesus was alive.

It was the Day of Resurrection for the disciples.

Sometimes I think about the issue of birth. At this point, I am able to trace my awareness of my physical aliveness back to having been born. I can’t go any further back than that. While I have memories, I am very aware that, following life-changing events

in my history, I tend to go back only as far as the “new me” that emerged from those life-changing events.

It appears that the Pentecostal experience was just such a life-changing event for the disciples. It appears that, finally, they came to grips with the reality that it was in belief, philosophy, and way of living that Jesus was fully alive – both before he was crucified, and after. It appears that their being alive dated back to that day when the change in them was as a “mighty rushing wind, and tongues as of fire upon them”. Maybe resurrection has to do with what happens to me when I come to grips with reality that Jesus is alive – was, and always will be.

The scripture tells us that, after the Pentecostal experience, people were added to the church daily. I wonder what those people heard, thought, believed, that resulted in their joining in the fellowship of the followers of Jesus. I go further. I wonder what happened that resulted in their entering into a new life – if you will, being resurrected from the dead. Would it be valid to observe that, coming face to face with Jesus, they moved from death to life?

How did they come face to face with Jesus? Maybe it was that, seeing and experiencing what was happening with the disciples, they finally heard and understood Jesus’ teachings, and what his life was all about.

In reality, neither the teachings of Jesus, nor his life make much sense in a world and in a society characterized by gear and anxiety. Nor among people who believe in the philosophy of, “I’ll get mine, no matter what it may cost you.”

Jesus taught and lived such things as, “Turn the other cheek.”, “Love your enemies.”, “Do good to those who spitefully use you.”

Jesus taught and lived such things as feeding the hungry, clothing the poor, visiting the sick and imprisoned, doing good, washing feet, serving.

Jesus was alive. Jesus died. Jesus is alive.

Because Jesus is alive, I, too, am alive. No, that isn’t quite the way to say it. Because I finally recognize the life that is Jesus’ life and accept it, I become alive. Until I believe, I am dead. When I believe, I experience resurrection to newness of life. Then I am alive.

No wonder Jesus said, “You must be born again.” “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” “I am come that you may have life and have it more abundantly.”

It is as if Jesus is saying, “I am life. My way is life. I am alive. And my way of life is your life.” To believe this with my life is resurrection and life for me.

Herein, indeed, is resurrection for each of us.