

## The Resurrection in Your Future

On Easter Day we often reflect on the dramatic effect the resurrection had on those very first witnesses: Mary, Peter, John . . .

But I would ask us to fast forward today, quite a few years and think about how the resurrection of Jesus might effect a *city* – pagan city, a thriving rowdy seaport full of warehouses, taverns and temples – all that makes the Greco-Roman world go round. Corinth has also experienced the profound effects to the resurrection – *invisibly* – for in this city there are *Christians*. But they are confused. And can we really blame them? Because for most of this city, the resurrection of Jesus, if one even has heard about it, is nothing more than a joke. Have you heard about these people? They worship a Jewish carpenter they believe rose from the dead – can you believe it! For everyone in Corinth knows that dead people don't rise from their graves. But is Corinth really much different from this town? Any town?

Yet today we are contemplating this resurrection – an event so unique, so out of the ordinary, so beyond the realm of natural process, that if one actually *believes* it, that belief itself sets one apart profoundly from the rest of the world. For if one believes that Jesus rose from the dead, this belief itself takes over one's life, creates and shapes every single aspect of one's outlook on the world, on society, and most of all what one thinks about God and the future. For Jesus he gave the promise that one day the dead in their graves would hear *his voice* and be risen. (John 5:28-9). If you can believe it, there is a resurrection in *your* future.

But by the time the First Letter to the Corinthians was written many good believing Christians had long since died, and not *one* of them, so far, had heard the voice of Jesus and risen from the dead. Not one single person, once dead, had ever returned to the land of the living.

And we can be *impatient* people, can we not. We make an investment in June, and if by December there's no return on it, we begin to worry. We become anxious. We start to contemplate Plan "B". We're not that good at long range planning.

So a delay of some years in the coming of Jesus was already beginning to wreak havoc on the infant church in Corinth. Some had turned to charismatic extremes and irrational beliefs that needed to be addressed. They needed to be patient. They needed to *rest* on the providence of God. And most of all *not* turn to what amounts to a Christianized version of the old pagan magic they had abandoned when they turned to Jesus Christ. They needed to live in the invisible power of the resurrection.

So how are we to live between now and the return of Jesus Christ? What are we to continue to believe? At the heart of these letters of Paul to Corinth, apart from his deep concern with all the issues of bad behaviour and, regardless of what they thought about him personally, Paul the apostle must bring them back to

### The Truth of the Gospel

For Paul, Christian faith is a continuation of Old Testament promises and fulfilment. He says Jesus died for our sin "*according to the Scriptures*. (3). Now, what *specific* Scriptures? Well, take for example Isaiah 53. There we are told that someone was wounded for our transgressions, someone was bruised for our iniquities, and that *that* someone's bruises would bring us spiritual healing." Judaism didn't interpret this to be referring to the coming Messiah, but Jesus himself made the connection. Please turn to . . .

### 1 Cor 11: 23-26 (Read)

Did you pick up on that Isaiah 53 theme? “This is my body which is *for you*. The very heart of Christian belief is that Christ’s death on the cross is an *atonement*. He was that *someone*. The alienation between God and human beings because of sin and for which the penalty is death, was overcome by one who died on *behalf of* others. And then, he was “*buried*.” This mention of burial verifies the physical reality of a corpse and the amazing historical reality of an empty tomb.

Because next, in this ancient Christian faith statement in 1 Cor 11 it says: “*he rose on the third day according to the Scriptures.*”

Paul is concerned that the Corinthians grasp the *objective reality* of the resurrection: it’s not just a vision, not just the “spiritual sense” that Jesus is still with us “in spirit”. No. He *appeared* to the apostles, to many others, and, more importantly to *Paul*. Belief in the resurrection, for Paul, did not depend on what others had told him but on a personal encounter with Jesus on the Damascus Road. Jesus appeared to *me*, he says, – me – one “untimely born,” literally a “freak,” ME, this violent persecutor of the church.

That’s important. Because at the heart of the Christian Gospel is . . .

## **GRACE.**

We don’t deserve to have God reveal himself to us as our *Friend*. Paul’s Damascus Road experience proves to us that God is all about revealing himself to even the worst sinners, reaching out even to people who aren’t on the right track. No matter who you are, God can reveal himself to you in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.

But of this be equally sure: this Christian Gospel is one that demands a *response*. Paul says this grace of God *was not wasted* on me. I responded to it I did something about it. – I repented, I worked hard – harder than others – not to pay for my wrongs, nor to compensate for my past sinful behaviours but in order that this grace would be reflected in my life into the lives of others.

And having reminded the Corinthians of this essence of the grace of God he will now urge the Corinthians to . . .

## **Engage in some honest self-reflection**

The Corinthians were not especially fond of Paul. He knows that. He called himself a freak – a dwarf – probably because that was the very label the Corinthians themselves had used on him. Paul actually *was* described in the earliest Christian records as a short, bow-legged man with narrow-set eyes. He wasn’t by all accounts very impressive in his physical appearance. But that didn’t matter. What matters is the *truth* of his message. He will now press these people to examine their current behaviour in the community and point out to them that their beliefs are just out of step with those of other churches.

For among other things, he says, some in Corinth are *denying that there is any resurrection from the dead*. They are departing from the teaching of the apostles and simply making it up as they went along. But in this Gospel, and especially in the teaching of the resurrection, there is a common denominator for all believers. To deny the objective reality of Christ’s resurrection is to have a faith considerably different from that of the apostles and one must wonder if such faith can even be still considered *Christian* at all.

So you and I gather around this table to say we still *approve* the witness of these original apostles. We still affirm the resurrection. After all these years, we are here this Easter morning

because . . .

### **We have something to prove**

Now, true, anyone looking for some sort of *scientific* proof that Jesus rose is going to be disappointed. *We don't know how this worked with the molecules and the physics of Jesus walking through stone walls, and the reversal of the natural process of decay in a dead human body.*

No one saw it – remember, the angels rolled the stone away not to let Jesus *out*, but to let us *in*. Resurrection can't be proved simply by pointing to an empty tomb. So what can we say with any certainty? In one way, any “proof” of the resurrection is only of any value to those who *already* believe. But we read the apostles words and it adds more confidence and knowledge to our inner conviction that, yes *I do know God through Jesus Christ*. Yes, his cross *has* brought me forgiveness. The resurrection proves that I have truly *died* with him and now I can live.

Either one has believed the witness of the apostles or one has not. For the resurrection lies outside the realm of clinical examination. But what we *can* prove, and what no one can deny, is that these ancient people, Paul and his fellows believed in the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. And such a belief could only have originated from an extraordinary, *miraculous* event. .

So what then do *we* have to prove? We have to prove that we have a genuine knowledge of a God who can raise the dead. We are at this TABLE today to *proclaim* the resurrection, just as Paul did, fully believing in it's reality. We are here today to press on our world the *significance* of the resurrection: If Jesus rose from the dead, then this is the Truth: God loves sinners and has found a way to overcome their deep, profound alienation from him – death itself. If you want to know *God and know his power in your life*, belief in the resurrection is not an option. The Christian life itself rests on . . . .

### **The certainty of the Resurrection**

So how come some in Corinth are saying that none of us is ever going to rise from of the dead? This really puzzles Paul. It is illogical given their belief in the resurrection of Jesus. That is the heart of the Christian message: Christ was raised from the dead – meaning of course, from among the dead people. But somewhere along the line the Corinthian teachers have ingested the Greek idea popular at the time that the *human body* is incapable of true spirituality and therefore cannot ever be part of a higher plain of existence. So they are denying that those who die will have any kind of future existence *that involves a bodily form*.

So what does it matter? As long as we die and go to heaven, who cares? But Paul will not allow this: for if *that* were the case, he says, then even *Christ* would not have been raised. And if Christ has not been raised then one would be perfectly justified to say that no one has *or ever will be* raised from the dead. And then, we have nothing to say: we put our dead in boxes, bury them, cherish their memory, but they're never coming back. Any talk of heaven and meeting again is nothing more than fantasy. . . .

**But if Christ rose**, then there must be *connection* between the resurrection of his body and one that will come to our own. So Paul, being the master persuader grants them their premise for the sake of argument: he will force them to face the irrationality of what they are actually saying. So *if* Christ was not raised . . .

### **Our preaching is futile and we are liars 14-16**

If the Corinthians *are* right in their assertion that there is no resurrection body in our future, not only are Paul and his fellow apostles wasting their time, they are, above all else lying. In fact, they are lying against God. Misrepresenting God. Witnessing against what God has revealed to be true: dead people don't return to life. What could be more terrible than if Paul and his friends were suggesting God did something God didn't really do. I mean really: death is already hard enough a reality for any of us to deal with without some fanatical fools disturbing grieving people with some nonsense claim of a future earthly existence. My loved one is gone, returned to the dust. Let's just leave it at that. But Paul won't leave it alone. Because, if that were the case. . . .

### **There is no way to forgiveness and human life has no real purpose. 17-19**

Forgiveness of sin is inextricably bound to the resurrection of the body. If there was no resurrection, says Paul, then those who died hoping in Christ have died without any hope of redemption. Because what *sin* really *consists in* is the *dis*-integration of human existence, body and spirit. In death, body and spirit are torn apart. That's wrong. That's not the way it's supposed to be. But *redemption* consists of the *re-integration* of the body and spirit.

Since they had bought into this Greek idea of *cosmic dualism* – that is to say there is *supposed* to be an eternal separation of the physical and spiritual realms, they are dual realms that do not ever touch – it is likely the Corinthians teachers were expecting, at death, to shed their bodies forever in order to enter a purer heavenly spiritual existence.

But Paul says no. He won't let it go. That's a belief incompatible with the Gospel. If there is no resurrection of the *body*, then, we humans might just as well go all the way and face it: we perish at death and have no future. For without our bodies, we cannot be not truly *human*. So if you are human . . .

### **There a resurrection in your future.**

Now it's obvious in our culture that every Easter becomes more about bunnies and less about the risen Christ. It's clear that many, if not most, in the mainstream of the Western world *deny* the literal truth of Christ's resurrection in the hope this will make Christian faith more *compatible* with life in the modern pluralistic society. Some even ridicule Christians, claiming that we focus only on life after death rather than dealing with the *real* problems of life in the here and now. And perhaps some Christians today, like those in Corinth, actually feed the fires of that kind of criticism.

But every Easter-Sunday, every other Sunday, every time we partake of the sacrament, we bear witness to life lived *in* this world, fully *in* the present day, and yet with the glorious hope for the future. Our lives are no random string of chance events. Those who see it that way will have to answer for it, for they are bearing false witness against God. We are created for the purpose of *glorifying* God, and God knows how far short we all fall of fulfilling that noble purpose. But although sin is a reality in our lives, so also the resurrection *is* a reality in our lives today. And that is . . . .

### **The beauty of this sacrament**

What I believe happens at Lord's Table is that there is an overlapping of heaven and earth. "The resurrection of Jesus has brought about a new state of affairs. God's future has

barged in on our present. I see the *sacrament* of the Lord's Table as not just a *symbol* of the new creation, not just a sort of signpost pointing us to something further down the road that we haven't really got to yet; but God's new creation is already here and we are actually a part of it. What we celebrate here today is the fact that one small piece of this old creation has already been transformed. Already been liberated. Already been set free from the bondage of decay. And that part of the old creation has been made new. The body that died on the cross became the body of Christ the Lord. A human body that had to eat ordinary bread and drink ordinary wine to be maintained in its existence is alive today with a life that death can no longer touch.

Jesus has gone ahead into God's new creation, and we look back to his death through this telescope he has provided to us – this *meal* he shared on the night he was betrayed. Here he comes to *meet us* in and through these symbols of creation – the bread and the fruit of the vine – which are then taken *into* us, into our mouths, into our guts– so that his story becomes our story, his life becomes our life.

By the work of the Holy Spirit we become part of this *event* of new creation. We become vessels, carriers, messengers of God's new creation and the saving events of crucifixion and resurrection – saving events that enable us to share this salvation with the world. (N.T. Wright, Surprised by Hope p275)

The sacrament is a means whereby the resurrection has . . .

## **Global implications**

### **21, 22**

Paul describes resurrection as a two stage process: first, Christ from the garden tomb long ago, and then, one day, at his coming, us. Jesus was the *first fruits* – the down payment, the pledge God gave that there will be a full harvest of humanity in the end. One day it will be our turn. His resurrection gives us a *certainty* whereby we can navigate in our world.

The resurrection of Jesus creates our view of the world. Imagine this: here you are sitting somewhere on the face of this earth. Now, imagine a line going down from where you sit right to the centre of the earth. And let that centre point of earth represent the events of Easter – the Resurrection. Now imagine standing and walking or driving or sailing in a ship to any other place on the face of the earth. You could do so always maintaining that direct line to the centre of the earth. There is no where you can go that doesn't relate to that centre. It is the basis of your world-wide grid.

In the Christian's life, the resurrection operates like the GPS system we use to find our way around. This marvelous system tells you exactly where you are on the face of the earth, and how to get to wherever you want to go. But the basic geometry upon which it's based begins at the centre of the earth. Out of that one point at the centre of the earth we map every square centimetre on the face of our globe. The earth's grid is essential to navigation. We depend on it. But it's totally invisible. There's no numbers on the ground stating latitude and longitude – unless we drive a survey stake in and mark it. We can't locate ourselves without instruments and points of reference.

In the same way our worldview is grid system. It is that by which we organize our entire existence. We can't go off the grid of the world. We can't move off the grid and isolate ourselves in one sector – one little bit of our reality – and ignore the rest – that's the problem all religions seem to have – they fail to be able to integrate the whole of human life around one centre.

The resurrection, however, can do just that. It is just as invisible in the real world as the global grid that guides each step of life. Every step we take, we take on resurrection ground. Every conversation, project, decision we make, it's right there beneath our feet. We're not always conscious of it, any more than we're conscious of our present co-ordinates of latitude and longitude. Yet the *resurrection* is our story. It answers our questions. O, it can, and will be challenged by others. It can be discussed. It's truth-value can be called into question. But it can't be bent. We can't move over and claim to be somewhere on the grid where we really are not. The numbers won't add up, there's a tension that pulls us back to centre. And to accept the resurrection as the centre is to cause a profound shift in life – like Paul on the Road to Damascus.

For if you believe that Jesus rose from the dead, not matter where you go, you're standing on holy ground, and there's a resurrection in your future.