

‘We believe in His resurrection’ ‘On the third day He rose again’

Introduction

What is unique about Christianity compared to all other major faiths? It was the events of that first Easter that came to a climax with the bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead. It changed everything. The fact that Jesus had predicted what would happen to Him on numerous occasions (Mark 8:31-32...*He spoke plainly about this...*; Mark 9:31; and Mark 10:33-34, for example) did not register with those first disciples because it had not happened before. We have all heard people say things that they plan to do in the future that appear highly implausible. Politely, we say nothing, but the words are often soon forgotten, because we are convinced it will not happen. However, I believe for the first disciples that there was a different explanation for their failure to grasp and accept what Jesus had told them about why He came. They were good Jews who attended synagogue Sabbath by Sabbath a consistent view of a military conqueror Messiah was proclaimed and no reference to the suffering Servant of the Lord revealed in the book of Isaiah. It would be my opinion, that it was only in Easter week itself that the disciples begin to put the pieces together but even then not in a convincing manner. When Jesus was recorded as dead, and buried in Joseph's tomb at teatime on the first Good Friday, they were completely shattered. They were not expecting any good news in time for the start of the next new week. They thought it was all over. As Cleopas stated to the unidentified risen Lord Jesus on the Road to Emmaus: ...but ***we had hoped*** that He was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place (Luke 24:21). It is really important to grasp that not a single one of them got upon on Easter Sunday morning in April 33AD expecting Jesus' resurrection from the dead.

1. The central importance of the resurrection of Jesus

However, the extraordinary miracle of God's power to raise the dead made Easter Sunday, the greatest day in human history. The fact of Jesus' resurrection was central to the life, preaching and witness of the Early Church. One of the earliest statements of belief that these new Christians could have recited by heart is I Corinthians 15:3-7 contained within Paul's declaration of its importance in vs 3-8: ***For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance:*** *that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,*⁴ *that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures,*⁵ *and that He appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve.*⁶ *After that, He appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep.*⁷ *Then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles,*⁸ *and last of all He appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.* Paul probably wrote this book, I Corinthians, in 54AD containing these words. In I Corinthians 15:1, he wrote: *Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand.* He proclaimed these truths to them verbally no later than 50AD. These are words familiar to the different churches dotted across the Mediterranean world so it is clearly many years previous that they were first formulated for use in the proclamation of the gospel. Paul, as a new convert to the Christian faith met with Peter (Cephas) and James, the leader of the Christian Church in Jerusalem, three years after his profession of faith possibly AD36 or 37 (Galatians 1:18-20). The chain of transmission of this information is clear from the beginning of the Christian Church.

The whole chapter of I Corinthians 15 is a well-argued statement of the significance of the bodily resurrection of Jesus. There were clearly people in Corinth who were completely sceptical about the whole idea of bodily resurrection. Some of these people were even attenders in the congregation at Corinth. In response to this viewpoint, Paul declared: *But if it*

is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? ¹³ If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. ¹⁴ And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. ¹⁵ More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that He raised Christ from the dead. But He did not raise Him if in fact the dead are not raised. ¹⁶ For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. ¹⁷ And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. ¹⁸ Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. ¹⁹ If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied (I Corinthians 15:12-17). It is a fundamental of our faith as Christians that Jesus was raised from the dead. Because He rose again so one day shall we with new resurrection bodies like His. Our relationship with Him by faith through the Holy Spirit is with a living Lord and Saviour. It is not paying our respects at a tomb with the body of a great leader. On the contrary, we may visit an empty tomb in Jerusalem because He no longer needs it, as He is alive forevermore. Hallelujah! When we participate in the funeral of a follower of Jesus, we can declare that we say farewell to them: 'in sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life'. The meaning of death itself was completely transformed through the significance of Jesus' death and resurrection from the dead.

2. The significance of the resurrection in the life of the Early Church

The Early Church is setting apart leaders in preparation for the launch of the witness on the Day of Pentecost. Judas Iscariot was dead so another individual was required to take his place. What criteria were required for nominated candidates? Acts 1:21-22 gives us the answer: *Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus was living among us,* ²² *beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become **a witness with us of His resurrection.*** The successful candidate had to have witnessed Jesus' earthly ministry and vouched for the faithful reporting of His message, but must also be a witness of His bodily resurrection. Not necessarily, seeing Jesus on the first Easter Sunday, but certainly during the forty days before His ascension back into heaven.

Notice in the Acts of the Apostles the importance of being an eyewitness of the resurrected Jesus. In Acts 2:31-32, in Peter's Sermon on the Day of Pentecost, he declares: *Seeing what was to come, he spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, that he was not abandoned to the realm of the dead, nor did his body see decay.* ³² *God has raised this Jesus to life, and **we are all witnesses of it.*** In Acts 3:15, in another sermon in the Jerusalem Temple, Peter declares: *You killed the author of life, but God raised Him from the dead. **We are witnesses of this.*** In Acts 4:32-34, Luke the author gives this vital summary of the impact of the gospel message that includes this reference to Jesus' resurrection: *With great power the apostles continued to testify to the **resurrection of the Lord Jesus*** (Acts 4:33). Or in the court appearance before the Jewish ruling Council, the apostles stated under oath in Acts 5:29-32: *Peter and the other apostles replied: We must obey God rather than human beings!* ³⁰ *The God of our ancestors **raised Jesus from the dead** – whom you killed by hanging Him on a cross.* ³¹ *God exalted Him to His own right hand as Prince and Saviour that He might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins.* ³² ***We are witnesses of these things,** and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him.* In the message Peter preached to the first Gentile congregation in the Roman centurion Cornelius' house, he declared: ***We are witnesses of everything He did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed Him by hanging Him on a cross,*** ⁴⁰ ***but God raised Him from the dead on the third day and caused Him to be seen.*** ⁴¹ *He was not seen by all the people, **but by witnesses whom God had already chosen – by us** who ate and drank with Him after He rose from the dead* (Acts 10:39-41). It is not only Peter who has this emphasis in his preaching. Paul, in his sermon in Antioch in central Turkey, said these words in Acts 13:29-31: *When they had carried out all that was written about*

Him, they took Him down from the cross and laid Him in a tomb.³⁰ **But God raised Him from the dead,**³¹ and for many days He was seen by those who had travelled with Him from Galilee to Jerusalem. **They are now His witnesses to our people.** In the completely secular Mars Hill debate with Athenian philosophers who completely rejected out of hand the possibility or even desirability of bodily resurrection from the dead, it was reported that: *They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection* (Acts 17:18b). These are good examples of what the Early Church did in proclaiming the faith across the Roman Empire. The clarity of their message was powerful and life changing when a steady number of other men and woman joined them in following the resurrected and ascended Lord Jesus Christ. The eyewitness testimony of the bodily resurrection of Jesus was compelling to the people given hope and a new understanding of God's plans and purposes for their lives in the light of what Jesus had done for them that first Easter.

3. The evidence of the empty tomb

The gospel writers all point to the empty tomb of Jesus. It is not something highlighted in the preaching of the Early Church, but something uncontested by anyone in Jerusalem. Matthew, whose gospel was written by a Jew in the first instance for Jewish readers, draws attention to the importance of this matter. In Matthew 27:62-66 we have recorded the steps taken to secure the tomb by the authorities. *The next day, the one after Preparation Day, the chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pilate.*⁶³ *'Sir,' they said, 'we remember that while He was still alive that deceiver said, "After three days I will rise again."*⁶⁴ *So give the order for the tomb to be made secure until the third day. Otherwise, His disciples may come and steal the body and tell the people that He has been raised from the dead. This last deception will be worse than the first.*⁶⁵ *'Take a guard,' Pilate answered. 'Go, make the tomb as secure as you know how.'*⁶⁶ *So they went and made the tomb secure by putting a seal on the stone and posting the guard.* Roman soldiers were employed to guard the tomb so there was no possibility of grave robbery. Everyone who wanted to know the place of the burial could locate it easily. Yet something extraordinary happened that Sunday morning. A group of female followers of Jesus had gone to pay their last respects at the site but what they saw and heard was truly shocking. *...they asked each other, 'Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?'*⁴ *But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away* (Mark 16:3-4). Then they saw an angel in the tomb who said to them: *'Don't be alarmed,' he said. 'You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid Him* (Mark 16:6). In John's Gospel, there are some details of what Peter and John, two of the apostles saw in the tomb a short time later: *He [John] bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in.*⁶ *Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there,*⁷ *as well as the cloth that had been wrapped round Jesus' head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen.* The strips of cloth coated in spices, that had been wrapped around the dead body are still there in place as is the loose cloth placed over the head of the deceased person. Any explanation other than bodily resurrection would have left evidence of the disturbance of the linen cloth and the spices, but they were intact apart from the absence of the body. The Lord's body had passed through the grave clothes as effortlessly as you and I go through an open door. No wonder John got it. *He saw and believed* (John 20:8b). There were, of course, some individuals not willing to accept the bodily resurrection of Jesus, but the evidence pointed so clearly towards an extraordinary conclusion that the person who had been confirmed as dead and buried in the tomb was risen from the dead. The memories of that day were impressed upon the witnesses for the rest of their lives. They felt compelled to tell what they had seen and heard that day.

4. The risen Lord Jesus Christ

The disciples afterwards admitted that they had not expected Jesus' resurrection from the dead (John 20:9). They were familiar with the prophetic passages pointing to it in the Old Testament (for example Psalm 16:10: *For You will not leave my soul among the dead or allow Your Holy One to rot in the grave*), but did not at first connect them with the death and subsequent resurrection of Jesus. It was even more embarrassing for these men to admit their initial response to the testimony of the female witnesses to Jesus' resurrection that first Easter Sunday morning. *It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and several other women who told the apostles what had happened.* ¹¹ *But the story sounded like nonsense to the men, so they didn't believe it.* (Luke 24:10-11). However, over the next forty days there were a remarkable series of resurrection appearance that showed to them beyond reasonable doubt that what they had thought was impossible had actually taken place. Jesus was alive again as He has said would happen.

The recorded testimonies of these appearances included some to individuals, others to smaller groups and in one case to around 500 people at once. They took place indoors and out of doors, in Galilee as well as in Judaea; on a hilltop and by the sea; in broad daylight as well as later in the evening when the light had faded or gone. It was not the appearance of a ghost or some other unexplained phenomena. Mary close to the tomb hugs Jesus tightly and does not want to let go. He had been recognised by His distinctive accent as He called her name.

Jesus said to her, 'Mary.' She turned towards him and cried out in Aramaic, 'Rabboni!' (which means 'Teacher'). ¹⁷ *Jesus said, 'Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."'* (John 20:16-17). In the Upper Room in Jerusalem on Easter Sunday evening, Jesus joined a group of His disciples as they were eating dinner (Luke 24:40-43). Some clearly wondered if they had seen a ghost but He proved that He was a physical human being by sharing some of the food on the table. ³⁷ *They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost.* ³⁸ *He said to them, 'Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds?'* ³⁹ *Look at My hands and My feet. It is I myself! Touch Me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.'* ⁴⁰ *When he had said this, he showed them His hands and feet.* ⁴¹ *And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, He asked them, 'Do you have anything here to eat?'* ⁴² *They gave Him a piece of broiled fish,* ⁴³ *and He took it and ate it in their presence* (Luke 24:37-43). There was a similar experience with a group of disciples on the beach in Galilee, recorded in John 21:12-13. *Jesus said to them, 'Come and have breakfast.' None of the disciples dared ask Him, 'Who are you?'* *They knew it was the Lord.* ¹³ *Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish.* They heard that familiar voice. They had seen Him with their eyes and some of them had even hugged or touched Him. The Lord they had loved and served was risen from the dead. The mission to which He had called them was now visibly on track, even more than before. In John 21:26-27, there is the account of the disciple Thomas meeting Jesus for the first time after His resurrection. *A week later His disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you!'* ²⁷ *Then He said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.'* ²⁸ *Thomas said to him, 'My Lord and my God!'* ²⁹ *Then Jesus told him, 'Because you have seen Me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.'* Have you confessed your faith in Christ?

One other piece of evidence that is important to mention is the change of the main day of worship for the followers of Jesus in the light of resurrection Day. Jewish followers of Jesus continued to observe the Jewish Sabbath as a separate holyday, but all followers of Jesus Jew and Gentile observed Sunday as the Lord's Day. This was the day set apart for Christian worship services. It was the day they gathered to observe the Lord's Supper (Acts 20:7); it

was the day they collected their offerings (I Corinthians 16:2); and John the Apostle in exile on the island of Patmos recorded that: *On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit...* (Revelation 1:10). It was the day when they gathered to hear the Bible read together (Dionysius of Corinth reported in Eusebius, *The Ecclesiastical History*, 4.23.11). This was reported, routinely as a matter of fact in the early second century Christian church writings. Ignatius, leader of the church in Antioch, in a letter to Christians in Magnesia, wrote: those who walked in ancient customs came to a new hope, no longer living for the Sabbath, but for the Lord's Day' (Ignatius, *Letter to the Magnesians* 9.1). The resurrection of Jesus from the dead was so important that the Christians gathered to honour and glorify their Lord on the day of resurrection. Only an event as significant as what happened that first Easter could account for such a change for the devout Jewish followers of Jesus in the first century AD.

The resurrection of Jesus not only changed the day of worship, but also once the Christian Church had a more prominent place in society the whole system of calendars in use was amended to the time before and the time after the birth of Jesus. Had there not been the extraordinary resurrection of Jesus from the dead this change would not have happened. I hope each one of us can also say: 'I believe in His resurrection' and declare in the words of the Apostles Creed 'on the third day He rose again' Amen

Questions for Reflection:

'What impact does your belief in Jesus' resurrection have on your life today?

'What impact does it have on the way you think of death and life beyond the grave?'

Song for Reflection: 'Thine be the glory risen conquering Son'

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tjz4yXUJrgU>