

## Did the Resurrection really happen? And if so, what does this mean for us?

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Good morning to my church family, and to our extended church family who have joined us from Eastbourne. It is good to have you with us today. Today we are continuing our season of celebration of the resurrection of Jesus.

The disciple Thomas said to the other disciples: “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”<sup>1</sup> We know him as ‘Doubting Thomas’, because he wouldn’t believe in Jesus’s resurrection until he had solid proof. Jesus showed him his hands and his side, and Thomas responded by saying ‘My Lord and my God!’ But what about us today, 2000 years later? We can’t reach out and touch Jesus hands and side as Thomas did. How do we know whether Jesus actually rose from the dead? And what does it matter?

Actually, it matters a great deal. Everything we believe depends upon the truthfulness of the Biblical account about the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. He claimed to be the Son of God, and most controversially, his disciples claimed that he rose from the dead on the third day after he had been crucified. Some people say it doesn’t matter whether the Gospel accounts are true or not. But it does matter, because if the Gospel records about Jesus and his resurrection are *not* true, then Christianity is a fraudulent religion that has deceived millions of people over the last 2000 years. If Jesus did *not* rise from the dead, then Christianity is based on the greatest lie in history.

So our first question is, **can we rely on the Gospel accounts?** Last century, some scholars said that the Gospels were *unreliable* because they were written a long time after Christ’s death. However, we now have strong evidence that the Gospels were written soon after the actual events. Dr John Robinson, from Trinity College Cambridge, originally believed that the Gospels were written at

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<sup>1</sup> John 20:25

least 100 years after the death of Christ. However, when he decided to re-examine the evidence, he was shocked to discover that much of previous scholarship on the New Testament was unreliable because it was based on a whole lot of 'unexamined assumptions'. His renewed research concluded that the apostles were the genuine writers of the NT books, and that they wrote their accounts between 32 and 64 AD, at a time when thousands of eyewitnesses to Jesus' resurrection were still alive. Sir Frederic Kenyon, former director of the British Museum and a highly respected NT textual scholar, concluded that "both the authenticity and general integrity of the books of the New Testament may be regarded as finally established."

Modern scholars now have more than 5,000 ancient manuscript copies of various portions of the NT that have survived in the Greek language, and there are an additional 15,000 in Latin and Syriac. No other important ancient text, whether religious or historical, has more than a few dozen copies that have survived. The importance of this early dating for the Gospels cannot be overstated. It would have been almost impossible to successfully distribute a blatantly false story about Jesus of Nazareth while thousands of his followers (whose lives depended on its truthfulness), as well as Jesus' opponents, were still alive to challenge it.

Another aspect that supports an early date is that the New Testament books do not mention the total destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple by the Romans in 70 AD. Neither do they mention the death of Paul in 64 AD, or Peter in 65 AD. It is likely this was because these events had not yet happened.

Even sceptical scholars agree that the Apostle Paul wrote his letter to the Romans in 50AD. In Romans chapter 1, Paul proclaimed Jesus as the *resurrected "Son of God"*, and accepted the views of the Gospel eyewitnesses. This was just 17 years after the resurrection. From Paul's letter to the Galatians<sup>2</sup> it seems that Paul first learned the Gospel accounts from Peter and James just *five* years after the crucifixion. Some people have theorised that Paul invented the Gospel, but Paul clearly said to the Corinthians that this was not the case. He said<sup>3</sup>: "I delivered to you as of first importance *what I also received*, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day." Paul also told the Corinthians that there were more than 500 people still alive who could confirm

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<sup>2</sup> Galatians 1:15-19, 2:1

<sup>3</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:3

the resurrection accounts.<sup>4</sup> His readers could have easily challenged him if his claim was not true.

Scholars give many other examples to back up early dates for the Gospels, such as corroboration of language, locations and 1st Century historical figures. The Gospels were also corroborated by non-Christian historians from the 1st Century, such as Josephus, Thales and Tacitus, and new findings in science and archaeology continue to corroborate the Gospel accounts. The New Testament is one of the most highly researched books of the ancient world. The fact that we have eyewitness accounts, remarkable copying accuracy as evidenced by the Dead Sea Scrolls, and extra-biblical corroboration, all make a compelling case for the truth and reliability of the Gospel accounts.

### **So, what proof do we have that Jesus actually rose from the dead?**

I recommend the book “Cold Case Christianity” by J Warner Wallace, a homicide detective and former atheist. He used his forensic skills to carefully look into the eyewitness testimony, historical facts and circumstantial evidence for the life and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. He came to the conclusion that Christianity must be true, and it transformed his life.

The evidence for the resurrection of Jesus is unbeatable. Many scholars and historians who have examined the evidence with an open mind have been persuaded to believe it. When Peter first stood up and preached, he was preaching to people who knew Jesus or knew about him. He said, “*This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses*”. So why didn’t the Jewish leaders stop this resurrection nonsense by producing Jesus’ body? They didn’t because they couldn’t. They were so worried that the disciples would claim that Jesus had risen from the dead (as Jesus had predicted) that they deliberately spread the lie that the disciples had stolen the body. So, *did* the disciples steal Jesus’ body and hide it? Actually, the disciples weren’t expecting Jesus to rise from the dead. They had locked themselves away, scared out of their wits that they were next to be betrayed and put to death. What changed them into passionate advocates for the truth of Jesus’ resurrection other than the fact that they had seen him alive after his crucifixion? They were prepared to die for their faith, and most of them did. Would you die for a lie?

Jesus’ disciples turned the world upside down. From a small sect in Galilee, the Jesus movement spread rapidly throughout the whole Roman world. It has been handed down to us today, despite determined attempts by men and

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<sup>4</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:6

women over the last 2000 years to stamp it out. How could this happen unless the message is *powerful*? And how can it be powerful unless Jesus *is* alive, and holds all power in heaven and earth as he claimed?

**So what does the resurrection mean** for us personally, and as a faith community who gather together in the name of Christ? The earliest followers of Jesus proclaimed the resurrection as the core belief of faith, and the ultimate proof of Jesus' deity. The bodily resurrection of Jesus is at the heart and soul of our faith.

The Apostle Paul said, "Now if Christ is preached that he has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ is not risen. And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty .. If Christ is not risen, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable. But now Christ is risen from the dead! And has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since by man (Adam) came death, by man (Jesus) also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ, all shall be made alive."<sup>5</sup> It stands to reason that if Jesus did *not* rise from the dead, then the Christian faith is false; but if Jesus *did* rise from the dead, then the Christian faith is true.

If Jesus is alive, it validates all that he said. We know that Jesus had a lot to say about his identity as the Son of God, and about his kingdom. Some people say that Jesus was just a good teacher, but He was *not* a good teacher if he lied about who he was. If we take into account one dimension of his teaching, such as 'do unto others as you would have them do unto you', we also need to take into account his claim that he is the Way, the Truth and the Life, and that he has the power to forgive sin. His disciple Peter said, "God raised Him up on the third day, and showed Him openly .. and He commanded us to preach to the people, and to testify that it is He who was ordained by God to be Judge of the living and the dead. To him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins."<sup>6</sup> A dead person cannot forgive sins. The resurrection of Jesus *assures* us of our forgiveness, as provided by his sacrificial death on the Cross. By his death *and* resurrection, Jesus took the punishment for our sins and is able to reconcile us to God. If Jesus is alive, he is able to fulfil his promise of eternal life with him in heaven.

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<sup>5</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:12-22

<sup>6</sup> Acts 10:40, 42-43

He said, “In my Father’s house are many mansions; I go there to prepare a place for you.” Paul said, “God who raised up Jesus will also raise *us* up.”<sup>7</sup> The resurrection of Jesus is a guarantee of our own resurrection. We don’t need to be afraid of death, because Jesus went before us and is waiting for us.

Emil told us last Sunday that the resurrection of Jesus gives us hope for the future. 1st Peter says, “By his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead”.<sup>8</sup> Without the resurrection there is no hope. Life is meaningless. Jesus promised life after death where there is no sadness or suffering, and he is able to keep that promise because he himself has conquered death.<sup>9</sup> Knowing that death is not the end gives hope to those who are suffering in this life. As Valda testified last week, Jesus is alive and with us, and he gives us strength to keep going that comes from outside of ourselves.

The resurrection demonstrates the power of God. Paul prayed that we might know “the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the great might that he worked in Christ when he raised Him from the dead.” Even though we are like weak earthen vessels, God’s power is ours because of the resurrection. Paul prayed that we might “*know him*, and the power of his resurrection.”<sup>10</sup>

Note that Jesus appeared first to Mary in the garden outside the tomb. From the beginning the Christian faith has had huge appeal for *women*, because Jesus accepted and validated them as his disciples. He set them free from the stereotypes of the time, and many of them became powerful teachers and leaders in the early church.

The Christian faith is unique among all the world’s religions because the resurrection separates Jesus from every person that has ever lived. All the founders of the world’s religions could not conquer their own death. But Jesus demonstrates that he is the Truth by dying and rising from the grave.

The Christian faith is unique because we serve a living Saviour. Samuel Taylor Coleridge once wrote, “Christianity is not a theory or speculation, but a life; not a *philosophy* of life, but a living presence.”

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<sup>7</sup> 2 Corinthians 4:14

<sup>8</sup> 1 Peter 1:3

<sup>9</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:26

<sup>10</sup> Philippians 3:9-10

The Christian faith is unique because it not merely a religion but a relationship. Jesus death and resurrection enable a right relationship between man and God. Our faith is founded on a personal God.

So, to conclude: our faith is not based on something abstract or an illusion. It is based on a living Saviour. If he really was the Son of God who rose from the dead and promised eternal life to those who put their trust in him, then his claims are of the utmost importance. At some point, if we are to take his claims seriously, we need to move from believing *about* him to believing *in* him.

Faith is not merely saying, “I believe this is true” but it is also relational: “I trust this person”. It is not just believing that God exists, but discovering that this God is wise, loving and good – and choosing to commit ourselves to God as a result. There is a world of difference between rational acceptance and personal transformation. As John the disciple said, “These things are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing in him you may have *life* in his name.”

Ephesians 2: “God who is rich in mercy, because of his great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in sins, made us alive together with Christ .. and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, that in the ages to come he might show the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.” <sup>11</sup>

I invite you to put your trust in the living Jesus, who still has the nail marks in his hands and feet, and the wound in his side. He has conquered death, and he has the power to forgive us, and grant us life in all its fullness. May we say with Thomas, “My Lord and my God”.

“Now to him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think according to the power that works in us, to him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever, Amen.” <sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ephesians 2:4-7

<sup>12</sup> Ephesians 3:20-21