

# **‘We believe in the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come’**

Lent 2021: St Thomas' Brampton

## **Session 2: The Resurrection in the Gospels and Acts.**

‘The New Testament writers speak as if Christ's achievement in rising from the dead was the first event of its kind in the whole history of the universe. He is the 'first fruits,' the 'pioneer of life.' He has forced the door open that has been locked since the death of the first human. He has met, fought, and beaten the King of Death. Everything is different because He has done so. This is the beginning of the New Creation: a new chapter in cosmic history has opened.’

(CS Lewis - Miracles)

### **Introduction**

The resurrection was the driving factor and major thread that wove itself throughout early Christianity. Accounts of the resurrection appear in all four Gospels and beyond, and is testified to throughout the New Testament. It goes deeper than merely being mentioned here and there. The resurrection is the entire background on which every other New Testament writing is etched. When reading the New Testament with fresh eyes this historical event seems to bring all the momentum and energy to the text. In fact the Apostle Paul was so taken by what had happened to Jesus three days after his crucifixion that he famously wrote:

‘...if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.’

*1 Corinthians 15.13-15*

In the last session we explored how first century Jews understood resurrection and looked at some of the key texts from the Old Testament and beyond. Today we turn to the Christian eyewitness accounts themselves - the four Gospels and Acts. But what is it that these New Testament books actually tell us about the resurrection? What did Jesus say would happen? How did Jesus' followers understand and make sense of what did happen? And how did this event alter the course of their lives, and ultimately history?

**Pause.** Before we dive into the Gospel's and the book of Acts, take some time to think/discuss. To what extent does the resurrection impact your faith and discipleship? For instance, if someone asked you why you were a Christian what would you say? Would you talk about Jesus' resurrection? Would you feel confident doing so?

## The Before

Reading through the Gospels it is striking that Jesus predicts his death and resurrection time and time again. In fact he mentions it so much that even before the events of Good Friday and Easter Sunday the resurrection is central to Jesus' message, ministry, and person (e.g. Matthew 16.21-23; Mark 9.30-32; Luke 9.43-45).

So the resurrection was not an event isolated from everything else that Jesus did and said and was. For example, in John 2.18-22 we find that Jesus has wound up the religious authorities by clearing the temple courts of the money changers and those selling animals for sacrifice. The enraged leaders challenge Jesus to prove his authority, this is Jesus' answer:

'Destroy this temple and I will raise it again in three days.'

Jesus was talking about his body as the temple and the resurrection as the proof. The resurrection was to vindicate Jesus and prove to the early believers he really was who he said he was: the Messiah and the Son of God. Of course it's one thing for Jesus to claim what was going to happen, but what did happen according to the Gospels and Acts?

## The Event

The Gospel accounts and Acts are all clear that Jesus both died on the cross and was raised from the dead on the third day as Jesus had said. Of course there are people who have refuted these claims, after all the story of Jesus' death and resurrection is both shocking and astonishing. It's not to be taken lightly - there's a lot at stake!

Some of the claims include:

- Jesus didn't die but fainted.
- The body was hidden or stolen.
- The resurrection wasn't physical but a 'spiritual' appearance.

Because of these claims it is important that we look closely at the biblical text to consider what the writers are trying to tell us. There are three things to consider: Jesus died; the tomb was empty; he appeared physically to his followers.

Read some of the following texts. Try to note down some of the specifics that you think the Gospel writers are trying to highlight. What might these mean? Why do you think they are trying to convey these messages? How might you use these accounts to refute the claims listed above?

Jesus died: John 19.31-37.

The tomb was empty: Matthew 27.62-66, 28.11-15.

Jesus appeared physically: Luke 24.28-32, 36-43.

It's clear that from the evidence in the Gospel accounts that the first Christians firmly believed that Jesus had died on the cross, the tomb was empty and that what they had seen was the risen Jesus in physical form.

On this last point some people have tried to wish away the resurrection as a theological creation or subjective experience that the disciples had, or perhaps they had seen some kind of an apparition or ghost. But, as the great 20th Century theologian Karl Barth understood it, if seeing Jesus was a subjective experience this wouldn't account for the empty tomb. And with regards to an apparition or ghost, well first century Jews had categories in which to place these kind of things.

If you were a first century Jew and believed in the resurrection from the dead - a popular belief and one that the Pharisees largely adhered to - it meant something very specific. It meant embodiment. Before this resurrection happened at the final coming of God's kingdom you would have believed that the dead took on intermediary states such like angels or spirits.

For instance take the occasion in the book of Acts where Peter miraculously escapes from prison in Acts 12. He goes to a house where many believers are gathered and knocks on the door. A woman called Rhoda answers. When she tells the gathered believers that Peter is there at the door they respond that it must have been his 'angel'. In other words they believed Peter had died and now they were seeing his angel. What they did not say was that he was resurrected. Indeed in the resurrection account of Luke 24.37 the disciples believe they have seen a ghost, they don't immediately consider Jesus to be physically risen.

For a first century Jew to use the term resurrection meant something very specific - it meant embodiment. It did not mean some kind of intermediate spirit state or a general term for life after death for which they had alternative language which they could have used, but they didn't. They believed they had seen the physical body of Jesus.

## **The Aftermath**

We all know that events have consequences, and major events have the potential to produce wide reaching effects. We don't need to look beyond the way coronavirus has altered the way we live in all kinds of profound and far-reaching ways. In fact some of the most powerful evidence for the resurrection is the impact that it had on the first Christians. Not only were the apostles Peter and Paul deeply impacted, but there was a fundamental theological shift in the first Christians from their deep rooted first century Judaism - and it really was deep rooted! Let's look at Peter and Paul in turn.

### **Peter and the disciples.**

The crucifixion was a devastating blow for Peter and indeed for all of Jesus' first followers. It was hard for them to believe that following Jesus had come down to this.

From their first call the disciples had devoted themselves to Jesus. But now all their hope had gone and Jesus was dead. Another failed messiah. Their friend was dead. Would they experience the same fate? Peter obviously thought so as he denied even knowing Jesus (Luke 22.54-62). The remaining male disciples fled. Even the previously adoring crowd turned on Jesus. It appears that no one put their neck on the line for him.

Don't rush past this. Try to feel and describe the disappointment and fear that Peter and the disciples felt. Sit in this place a while, if you're in a group discuss this because it will make what comes next all the more astonishing.

Once you've done this read Peter's speech in Acts 2.14-41. The context is after the resurrection. It is Pentecost, and Peter has got his spark back - why do you think this is? What are the central messages of his speech?

Of course before and after Jesus there were proclaimed messiahs. The expectation was that they would defeat the oppressor (The Roman Empire) and cleanse the temple. All of them failed, many of them were martyred. And when your messiah failed there were two options. Give up on messiahs all together or go onto the next shiny new one. It was never claimed that other martyred Jewish messianic figures had risen from the dead. Other categories and language was used to describe their 'upgrade' into some kind of afterlife, but never resurrection.

In the eyes of the world Jesus was another failed messiah. But not for the first Christians like Peter. They didn't go back to their day jobs or follow someone else. They continued to follow Jesus. This was unprecedented. In fact they were even more fervent than they had been previously.

Take a look at this insightful passage from Acts 5.33-39 where we see this played out, and ask yourself the questions...

How were the lives of the first Christians shaped by the resurrection? What kind of things did they do? How did they see the world differently? Do you see this reflected in the Church today and in your life?

## **Saul/Paul**

One of the most fascinating characters in the New Testament is Paul. When it comes to considering the impact of the resurrection he is hard to ignore. Previously known as Saul (before he met the risen Jesus), he was a well known enemy of the first Christians and steeped in the traditions of the Pharisees. In his own words in Philippians 3.5-6 Paul was:

'...circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.'

Again pause and consider Saul for a moment. Zealous in his faith. A keen persecutor of Christians. Try and imagine his life and religion. What would it take for that to change? What kind of event would have to happen?

Then read his story here: Acts 9.1-19. What do you make of this change?

Paul and others were so convicted by what they had seen that they were prepared to face persecution and death to preach the gospel. Some people suggest the resurrection was a big cover up by the disciples. But why would such a different bunch of people, including Paul of all people, risk their lives in pursuit of a lie?

Chuck Colson, who was embroiled in the Watergate scandal said this of the lie claim:

‘12 men testified they’d seen Jesus raised from the dead, proclaimed that for 40 years, never once denying it, despite beatings and torture. In Watergate 12 of the most powerful men in the world couldn’t keep a lie for three weeks! [But] 12 apostles could keep a lie for 40 years? Absolutely impossible!’

The resurrection changed the course of the early Christian’s lives completely. It was this that kept them going in the face of the most awful persecution. Jesus had risen, they were transformed, and in turn human history was changed forever.

## Conclusion

At the conclusion of his Gospel John says that Jesus did so many things that the whole world couldn’t hold the books of those stories (John 21.25). Indeed the stories of Jesus encounters continue today.

As we close, consider for a moment the stories of your own personal encounters with Jesus. The times he has touched or transformed your life. Maybe you could share the testimony of how you came to faith. Remember the seemingly dramatic stories are not more or less important than the more ‘ordinary’. Although when Jesus comes into your life it is never ordinary! If you are in a group and feel able, perhaps you could share these together.

Once you have done this why not take some time to worship. Give thanks for these stories. Give thanks to God for Jesus, and for the resurrection.

Now, take time to pray. If you are prepared and willing, ask God to deepen your faith so you might become as convinced of the resurrection as the first Christians were.

Finally, reflect. What does the resurrection mean for your life today? How will you respond?