

“I have seen the Lord!”

John 19:38-20:18

If I were to ask you ‘what day is it today?’ of course you’d all answer ‘it’s Easter Sunday’ – and you’d be right and you’d all get your five bonus points. But does anything about that answer strike you as strange? Now it’s not the Easter bit I’m interested in – it’s the Sunday bit. Forget for a moment that this is Easter. Just think about the fact that you are here on a Sunday. Don’t you think that’s strange? Because if you don’t, you should. You see, for hundreds, even thousands of years, the Jewish people – from whom Christianity arose - gathered together to worship on Saturdays, on the Sabbath, not on Sundays. And breaking that Sabbath rule would have been unthinkable for a first century Jew. People died for that. But unless something went very wrong with your diary, you weren’t here yesterday and you are here today. So why? What happened 2000 years ago that explains the fact that from the earliest point in their history Christians – who, remember, for the first however many years were almost exclusively Jews, - changed their day of worship from Saturday, the Sabbath to Sunday, the first day of the week. Because something must have happened! And something must have happened to explain why these same Jews – strict monotheists – only worshipping the One true God, should start worshipping a man as God. So something with even greater implications than the Sabbath with all its legal, cultural, and religious weight, something to do with this man Jesus, must have happened to persuade those first century Jews to undergo such a monumental shift in their thinking and their worship.

Well, let’s look at the event that triggered it all.

Read John 19:38-20:18

An Unexpected Event

Now, I don’t think it’s unfair to say, that one of the most convincing arguments for the authenticity and reliability and the simple plain truthfulness of the gospels is that the first disciples do not come out of them smelling of roses. If you read Christian biography, either ancient or modern you would think that the great saints who have gone before us never put a foot wrong. They never had a bad day, they never yelled at the kids, or got grumpy with their spouse or went for less than three minutes without praying. And reading them you are left feeling totally inadequate. But the gospels are very different. They make no attempt to cover over the faults and the failings of the disciples – they just tell it as it is, without a spin-doctor in sight. There’s no attempt to massage the message to make the leaders look good. And yet it was those same leaders who either wrote or helped write the gospels in the first place.

And perhaps nowhere is that honesty more obvious than when it comes to the events surrounding the empty tomb on this first Easter Sunday morning. Because despite the fact that Jesus had told them that the Son of Man would die but be raised again on the third day – the penny just hadn’t dropped. And as the other gospels make clear the disciples greeted the empty tomb with at best disbelief and at worse outright incredulity. None of them were expecting this.

But you’ve got to give them their due: after-all, everyone knows the dead don’t rise.

And Jesus was dead. He had been flogged and then crucified. After six hours on the cross John tells us Jesus cried out “it is finished,” and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit’ (John 19:30). But to make sure He really was dead, because after all most young men would take hours even days longer to die by crucifixion, the Roman soldiers shoved a spear into His side, and John tells us ‘at once there came out blood and water’ (John 19:34). Now that might seem like a nothing kind of detail of detail to you – but it’s a bizarre thing to record unless John had seen it. And if you know your anatomy and physiology there are really only one or two explanations for that and that is that Jesus has suffered from either a massive pericardial effusion - that’s fluid collecting around the heart – or pleural effusions – that’s fluid around the lungs – or both. So when this spear pierces his heart and the blood comes out and the watery fluid follows, and John, who was a fisherman not a doctor, saw it and simply records what he sees, you and I can know with certainty, Jesus was dead.

And His disciples knew that. John tells us that two of them, two good men, two secret disciples of Jesus, members of the council - Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, pluck up the courage to go to Pontius Pilate and ask for Jesus’ body. And taking His body, they bind it with bucket loads of spices, 75 pounds, 33 kilos of them. Now just ask yourself, would they do that if they were confidently expecting Jesus to rise in three days? Wouldn’t that simply be a waste of expensive spice? That’s the kind of thing you might do for a man you think is worthy of honour in his death, it’s not something you do for someone you think is going to kick them all off in 72 hours. So neither Joseph nor Nicodemus were expecting anything remotely like a resurrection. They’ve gone to embalm a corpse.

And neither was Mary. When she gets to the tomb that Sunday morning she finds the stone rolled away and the tomb empty. So she runs back to tell Peter and the other disciple, who is probably John. But listen to what she says, v2, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” The stone has been rolled away, the body’s not there, but Mary’s explanation for that is that someone must have moved the body and put it somewhere else. She’s not leaping up and down shouting ‘Hallelujah! It’s happened, He’s risen!’ So Mary wasn’t expecting a resurrection either. And neither from what we know here and in the other gospels were Peter and John and all the other disciples.

Why? Because they, and everyone else knew, the dead don’t rise. Death is death. Death is final. Sure Jesus had brought others back to life, but that was Jesus and now He too was dead. And the Hellenistic Greek culture that surrounded them had zero expectation that the dead could rise. Homer and Plato’s version of Hades was one of either a shadowy, shady half-existence, or of living on the Island of the Blessed, or, if you were lucky enough to be a god, of being translated into a star. But no-one gave any thought to a bodily resurrection – their philosophers wanted to get rid of their bodies, not re-inhabit them. Which explains why when the apostle Paul came to Athens preaching that Jesus had risen from the dead he was mocked and called a babblers: who would believe that nonsense? Everyone knows the dead don’t rise.

And whilst there was a growing belief in physical, bodily resurrection amongst Jews at the time, no-one thought it was for now. When the resurrection happened it would be for all the righteous Jews, on the last day. It was an end-of-time hope, not a now, today hope.

And yet, when Mary came back from the garden a second time she came saying, "I have seen the Lord" (John 20:18) and with one after another of the disciples saying the same thing, that message, "I have seen the Lord' - I watched Him die, I saw where He was buried, but I have seen Him alive, physically, bodily alive,' that became the central message of the disciples.

And they never deviated from it. They weren't fools, they knew that when you die, you're dead. They weren't expecting this and yet they were unshakeable in their message, even to the point of their own deaths – we have seen the empty tomb and we have seen Jesus alive.

Now get this, from what we call Good Friday, when Jesus was crucified, through to Easter Sunday, these first disciples were broken and dispirited men. Just a week before, they thought they had welcomed their king into Jerusalem. With songs and shouts and palm branches they thought they had witnessed the arrival of their conquering, victorious messiah. But then it had all gone horribly wrong and they had watched Him be crucified and die. And to compound their misery they all knew that, to a man, they had failed. When their moment came and they could have acted with heroism and made their stand against the enemy, they had all denied they had anything to do with Jesus and fled the scene. And yet, here they are, three days later transformed.

Within 50 days, at the day of Pentecost, Peter, the one who denied Jesus, stands before a crowd that in all likelihood is the same that called for Jesus to be crucified, and calls out, 'This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death... [v32] This Jesus God raised up, and of that *we are all witnesses.*' (Acts 2:23, 32)

And that message of the resurrection became their message. They preached it in the temple, to the council that condemned Jesus, throughout wider Jerusalem, to Jews and to Gentiles across the Roman world. Why? Why make something that was so counter to what everyone else believed and knew to be true – that the dead stay dead – why make that your central message? Because they had seen the Lord alive! And if Jesus has been raised from the dead it changes everything.

It Changes Everything About How You View Jesus

Last week, as we looked at Jesus coming on a donkey, in triumph into Jerusalem, I used the illustration, from CS Lewis' book *The Last Battle*, of Shift the ape and his paper crown. Shift thinks he's someone special, he thinks he's a king when all the time he's just a fraud with a paper crown on his head. And as Jesus enters Jerusalem, claiming to be king, is He just a 1st Century equivalent of Shift – a nobody claiming to be somebody, or is He who He claims to be – the greatest king who ever ruled? And the resurrection decisively answers that question.

You see if Christ has not been raised from the dead, we could simply add Him to the pantheon of religious teachers or wise men or moral leaders we could pick from. Just add him to the list – there are plenty of them. But arguably, He wouldn't deserve to be on that list, because He claimed to be not just *a* king, but *the* King, and if He wasn't raised, He's nothing but a fraud, a hoax, and it's all an empty nothing. As one commentator writes, if He hasn't been raised all that's left is the 'decomposing corpse of an itinerant Jewish carpenter-turned-rabbi' (Prior 1 Cor). If He's not Lord over life and death, He's lord over nothing.

But He has been raised from the dead and that fact changes everything. Far from being one more moral teacher among many, Jesus is in a league of His own – and all that He said and did, all that He claimed for Himself – has been vindicated by God, because – let's face it - only God can raise the dead. Which is why Paul says in Romans 1:4 that Jesus 'was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead.' If you want to know what God thinks of Jesus, Paul says, look at the resurrection. God declared Him to be His powerful Son, He put His seal of approval on Him, by raising Him from the dead.

But the resurrection doesn't just confirm who Jesus is, it tells us what He has done; and by rising again, He has vanquished death. Death is the enemy that stalks us every day, it casts its long shadow over every one of us, and Jesus has broken its power. In Romans 6:9 Paul says, 'death no longer has dominion over him.' In 1 Corinthians 15:22 Paul says, 'For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.' Our first father Adam left us a toxic legacy of sin and alienation and ultimately death; but through His death and resurrection, Jesus has left us a legacy of life. It's why He can say to a grieving Martha, 'I am the resurrection and the life' (John 11:25).

But the resurrection doesn't just transform how we view Jesus, it transforms how we view ourselves.

It changes everything about how we view ourselves

In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul talks at length about the resurrection – and he contemplates the state of affairs that would exist if the resurrection hadn't happened, what the situation would be if his and the Corinthian Christians' faith was built on a hollow, empty fraud, rather than on the empty tomb. This is what he says: 'If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain... If Christ has not been raised your faith is futile and you are still in your sins... If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied' (1 Cor 15:14, 17, 19).

In other words, Paul and every other Christian – including you and me – we are wasting our time, we're frittering away our lives – what we believe is nonsense, it's empty, it's vain, it's futile, if Christ hasn't been raised. It means Christ didn't die for our sins, or if He did, we don't have a clue whether or not God accepted that sacrifice – so we're still dead in our sins, with zero assurance of salvation. And because of the kind of life we as Christians are called to live – lives of sacrificial generosity and service – laying our lives down in service for Christ and

for others, doing nothing from our own selfish ambition but rather considering others more significant than ourselves, if the very premise, the very foundation of what that costly life is built on isn't true, then we are of all people most to be pitied. If the resurrection isn't true, Paul says, we might as well be outside playing football, or enjoying the mountains as being in church. We might as well use our money to please ourselves as give it away. We might as well do everything we can to promote ourselves and get our own way in life, rather than serve others. If Christ has not been raised, everything else is a sham.

But then he says, v20, 'But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead.' And that changes everything about your life.

Firstly, it means that when you put your trust in Jesus and His death on your behalf and believe God raised him from the dead, you too can know newness of life. You can know what it means to be born again, to start afresh. In 1 Peter 1:3, Peter says, 'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.' In Jesus' resurrection He earns for you a new life like His new life. Our spirits are made alive with resurrection power as we trust in Him. In Paul's words from Romans 6, just as we have been united with Jesus in His death, so we are united with Him in His resurrection, so that, Romans 6:4, 'just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.' So because Jesus died and lived again, you can live. Not the half-baked life the world offers you, with all its toys, but the new, vibrant really alive life that Jesus offers.

Secondly, because Jesus was raised from the dead you can know, deep in your heart, that your sins have been wiped away. Paul says in Romans 4:25 that Jesus 'was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.' You can know that you are justified, that you are declared not guilty before God, not because you're so good, or done just enough to impress God, but because Jesus died for your sins, because He has paid the price for your sins, and in raising Him from the dead, God has declared, I accept that payment – and you go free. The debt has been paid, His resurrection proclaims your justification, it's your 'not guilty' verdict. So this resurrection isn't just a minor detail which you can take or leave, it's the thing that means that whatever sin you are struggling with, and you look at your life and feel dirty and slimed, and guilty and you feel like you can't approach God and you're not worthy, it is this resurrection that says 'not guilty, the debt has been paid by Jesus, the Father accepts it, there is nothing left to pay!'

And having been born again and declared not guilty this same resurrection power becomes the power at work in your life, making you more like Jesus. You see, God doesn't start you off on the Christian life and then say, sorry but now you're on your own, figure it out in your own strength.

In Eph 1:19-20, Paul tells the Ephesian Christians that he's praying for them and praying specifically that the eyes of their hearts would be enlightened so that they might know 'what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ

when he raised him from the dead.' You might not understand it now Paul is saying, you might not grasp it, but God is powerfully at work in your lives and that power is Jesus' resurrection power. And Paul wants them to see that. That's why Paul prayed for himself, 'that I might know him and the power of his resurrection' (Phil 3:10).

You see, when you come face to face with your own weakness – when your eyes are opened to your own failings, you can become despondent, because you realize in that moment of honesty that you'll never live as you're called to live in your own strength. You just don't have the ability. But Paul's prayer is that instead your eyes would be opened to God's resurrection power in your life.

It's the power that enables you to consider yourself dead to sin but alive to God (Rom 6:11) – the power to say no to temptation and sin, and yes to Jesus and to holiness. It's the power to live a life of fruitfulness. Paul says in Romans 7:4 that you 'have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead, in order that we may bear fruit to God.' This new resurrection life inside you is fruit-bearing life, giving you the power, the ability to live not for yourself but for Jesus (2 Cor 5:15). Col 3:1-2 says, 'If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.' Knowing that Christ has been raised from the dead, having your eyes opened to that same power at work in your life, will give you both the desire and the strength to go for God, to think and live with that Christ centered mindset, rather than being indistinguishable from the world.

But the fact of Jesus' resurrection doesn't just affect how you see this life, it radically affects how you see the next. This life isn't all there is, and what lies ahead is not some floating, ghostly, shadowy, disembodied existence. The Bible says Jesus' resurrection is just the first-fruits: 1 Cor 15:22-23 again, 'For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the first-fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ.' This life isn't it, it doesn't end here – Christ's death and resurrection have secured a far-brighter future. And the God who raised Jesus is also going to raise up those who believe in Him (2 Cor 4:14). I say this respectfully: Jesus is just the first of many.

So if you're a Christian and tempted to doubt, or you feel slamed by sin and guilt; or if you're struggling and fighting with God over the life He calls you to and you want to keep control; or if you're not yet a Christian and you're wondering what to make of Jesus and what to do with Him. Take a look again inside the tomb. It's empty. And that changes everything.