

John 20:19-30: Resurrection

Easter 2, 16th April 2023

Last Sunday was Easter. It celebrates the defining event for Christians, when an apparent disaster, a seeming failure, the end of Jesus and his teaching, was revealed as a triumph. It confirmed who Jesus was, that God was with him, that he was God. A sign of hope, revealing that death does not triumph, that we are not slaves to sin, that we are loved and can have a new life.

The first reading, from the book of the Acts of the Apostles, is the first ever statement of the Christian faith, before Christians were even called 'Christians', before it was a thing. This was Peter's first sermon, on the day of Pentecost. As in the resurrection appearance in John, the disciples were in private, together in a room, when the Holy Spirit came upon them. The stir this created drew a crowd, and this was Peter explaining what had happened.

God had already shown himself in the miracles and signs through Jesus during his ministry, and the resurrection is the final confirmation: death could not hold him.

But what is it about? Why is it so important? Why does Paul say in 1 Corinthians (5:17) *If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.*

It is strange that we celebrate Christmas more than Easter. There are so many more traditions: decorations (from about October), Christmas trees, cards, presents, turkey dinners, nativity plays... We still only have two Bank Holidays, but Christmas catches the imagination in a different way. It is probably to do with the difficult message of Good Friday. While the message of Easter Day is positive, hopeful, life-enhancing, it only makes sense in the context of Jesus crucifixion. God coming to us as a baby is a cuddly message. Easter bunnies may be cuddly, and Easter eggs are nice, but it is difficult to get much meaning out of them.

There was an article in the Guardian last Christmas¹ that asked of Christians 'Why wear the symbol of a barbaric torture?' It was not a particularly good article, and I find it interesting how ostensibly tolerant liberals get so emotional about other people's private beliefs. But it is a bit weird that the cross is the sign of Christianity. Even St. John and St. Stephen's logo has the cross on it.

But without the cross, there would be no resurrection. The details of the event are gruesome. Christians dwell on them sometimes, generally in order to appreciate in amazement what Jesus was prepared to suffer on our behalf. No-one really knows how it works that Jesus' death led to us being able to draw closer to God. Hence why there are lots of theories of the atonement, not just one accepted idea. There seems to have been all sorts of things going on.

- In some way, Jesus accepted punishment on our behalf, in our stead. There are problems with some of these interpretations (satisfying the wrath of God does not
- Jesus' death exposed evil for what it is. It demonstrated evil's inability to cope with goodness.
- It teaches us about submission, not fighting back. God himself, all powerful, did not use force and power to 'win'. Jesus allowed to be *Like a lamb led to the slaughter* (Isaiah 53:7).
- Jesus showed us what love really was. *No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends* (John 15:13).
- In dying, Jesus defeated the powers of death and evil (Christus Victor).

In the absence of a neat, logical explanation, people have turned to more artistic ways of trying to communicate the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection.

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/dec/23/christmas-religious-christian-humanist>

An obvious one is C. S. Lewis' *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Aslan is killed by the White Witch, giving himself in return for Edmund. But there is a deeper magic the witch does not understand, and he comes to life again. This is the illustration from the original book, of Susan and Lucy dancing with the risen Aslan.

Less obvious, but definitely there, is Harry Potter. In the final book, *The Deathly Hallows*, Harry gives himself up to Voldemort to save his friends. Again, there is a deeper power in love and self-sacrifice that evil does not understand or appreciate, and Harry comes back to life again and defeats Voldemort. (No picture – it happens in a flash in the film.)

The resurrection happened quietly. Again, this teaches us about God's way. Not announced with fanfare, no advanced publicity, no cameras or social media. Just the plain truth, which you can look at and choose to accept, or not. A few women saw him near the tomb. He appeared to groups of disciples, including in the locked room in our reading from John. Later he appeared to five hundred people (1 Cor. 15:5-7). But it was not public.

It is the resurrection that pivots the whole story. Without it, the disciples would have been left confused, doubting. The disciples who unknowingly met Jesus on the road to Emmaus said *we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel*; after he died, that hope had died too. Jesus, as he walked with them told them *Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations* (Luke 24:45-47).

So, Jesus himself sees the result of Easter being forgiveness of sins. Yes, it also shows God's stamp of approval on Jesus, confirming all that Jesus said and did in his life on earth (Rom. 1:4). Yes, it shows that Jesus defeated death, that there is a life after with God for us too.

Christians are often portrayed as being always thinking about sin, making everyone feel guilty all the time. This is the opposite of the Easter message. It is a way out of guilt, a way of, yes, recognising our failures and inadequacies, but providing a way of resolving them. The love that took Jesus to the cross is the same love he approaches us with now, unconditional, life-changing. There is no barrier between us and God after the resurrection.

Easter is good news. He is risen indeed! Alleluiah!

Jeremy Thake
St. John & St. Stephen.

John 20

Jesus Appears to the Disciples

19 When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' 20 After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. 21 Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' 22 When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

Jesus and Thomas

24 But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 25 So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' But he said to them, '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.'

26 A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' 27 Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.' 28 Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' 29 Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'

The Purpose of This Book

30 Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. 31 But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

Acts 2

Peter Addresses the Crowd

14a But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them:

...

22 'You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know— 23 this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. 24 But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power. 25 For David says concerning him,

"I saw the Lord always before me,
for he is at my right hand so that I will not be shaken;
26 therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced;
moreover, my flesh will live in hope.
27 For you will not abandon my soul to Hades,
or let your Holy One experience corruption.
28 You have made known to me the ways of life;
you will make me full of gladness with your presence."

29 'Fellow Israelites, I may say to you confidently of our ancestor David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. 30 Since he was a prophet, he knew that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would put one of his descendants on his throne. 31 Foreseeing this, David spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, saying,

"He was not abandoned to Hades,
nor did his flesh experience corruption."

32 This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses.