

## **Easter Sunday 2013 – Jesus Christ has risen from the dead (and that makes all the difference)**

*1 Corinthians 15:1-8; 15:11-20; John 20: 24:1-19*

He is Risen! [He is risen indeed!!]

### **Jesus' resurrection – foundation of the Gospel**

The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is the foundational event of the Christian faith around which all else pivots. Without it Jesus is just another delusional religion, caught up on the “wheel of history” (as Schweitzer put it),<sup>1</sup> dying in despair in a futile gesture at changing the human situation. A “good” life, a noble death, but ultimately a pointless one: Rome 1. God 0.

With such a loss, Christianity becomes just another religion, its exclusivist claims at best sadly absurd, at worst offensive and dangerous;<sup>2</sup> and those who believe otherwise, as we heard from Saint Paul, “of all people most to be pitied.”<sup>3</sup>

Rowan Williams notes that it is around the resurrection narratives that “the keenest and bitterest debates have raged”<sup>4</sup> both within the church and outside it. Yet, beyond the halls of academia – or even there – it seems to me one of the remarkable things about discussion around the resurrection of Jesus is just how little of it takes account of what the eyewitnesses said and did. Yet this is crucial.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Albert Schweitzer, *Quest For The Historical Jesus*, John Hopkins UP, Baltimore 1906 1998, p. 370-71

<sup>2</sup> 1 Cor.1:23.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Cor.15:19.

<sup>4</sup> Rowan Williams, *Resurrection – Interpreting the Easter Gospel*, Pilgrim Press, Cleveland 2002, ch.5 ‘The Risen Body’, p.91.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*, Eerdmans, 2008 is a key text here.

## **Congruency of the early Christian witness...**

When looking at the resurrection of Jesus as presented in the Gospels, one could just as easily say that the casual reader can only be impressed by the *congruency* of the accounts presented. Certainly in their basic assertion that Jesus rose bodily from the dead, they are in complete accord.

## **...to the *bodily* resurrection of Jesus**

Moreover, as comparing our readings from Paul to our Gospel reading from John demonstrates, this conviction that the *bodily* resurrection of Jesus is at the core of the Gospel extended very quickly across the various traditions and communities in the primitive church.

It is worth quoting Rowan Williams at length here:<sup>6</sup>

“The risen Jesus is by no means, for *any* of the New Testament writers, a *resuscitated* body and no more; yet [strangely] he relates to his disciples in recognisably *bodily* ways. He speaks and is heard; it is possible to touch him; he eats and in Luke <sup>7</sup> he apparently does so precisely to make the point that he is not a “spirit”. [In Matthew Mary grabs his feet!]<sup>8</sup>

In fact, Jesus relates to his disciples as he has done before. The resurrection stories... are not stories of theophanies or visions as in the Old Testament. Rather, they belong in the same world as the narratives of Jesus’ ministry. It is *because* of this *ordinariness* that their strangeness emerges in such sharp relief.

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<sup>6</sup> Williams, p.91 f.f.

<sup>7</sup> Lk.24:41-3.

<sup>8</sup> [ ] my addition – see following also.

Seeing the [resurrected]<sup>9</sup> Jesus, the Jesus who belongs with God, is disturbingly like meeting any human being... to meet an exalted, glorified human-like being in a vision (like that described in the first chapter of John's Apocalypse), [would be more expected]; but to meet [the risen Jesus in a garden,] on a road or around a table is far more bewildering.

[It is true that Jesus is also described as "shining". Somehow he's the same yet different. In some sense he's a "glorified" Jesus.]

...Meeting the risen Jesus, then, poses uniquely acute problems of description, yet is apparently not an experience which involves any extraordinary means of knowing or seeing, [you don't have to be a mystic or have any secret religious knowledge]. Indeed, "vision" is a clumsy category for such events, since its normal usage carries overtones of the private, the limited and the exceptional.

... Yes, Jesus appears only to the few, [at first anyway], yet his presence with the disciples *and* his availability to *all* is everywhere in the New Testament insisted upon. "I am with you" is the message of the Easter Jesus.

The appearances are not fleeting manifestations of a normally absent being... rather, the relation of the risen Jesus to his disciples is continuous with the relationship they have already known: it is not suddenly privatised, [or spiritualised], or turned into an obscure reverential memory.

In his ministry, Jesus created and sustained the community of his friends by speech and touch and the sharing of food; and so, after

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<sup>9</sup> "exalted" (Williams)

his resurrection, that community is maintained in the same way. It is not taken away from history, from matter, from bodies, from words and action.

... For all four Gospels, then, the story [which provides the basis] for the confession that Jesus was “raised on the third day”, was the empty tomb. It’s significance cannot be over emphasised if we are to grasp what turned these frightened women and men into a community, albeit an imperfect one, that would change the world.”

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### **Resurrection – ground of hope (and witness)**

William’s last point is of crucial importance for our church if we take our witness to Christ in this world seriously.

As we have heard, Paul argues that without the resurrection of Jesus, proclamation of the Gospel is pointless.<sup>10</sup> As then for Paul and the early Christian movement, so now.

These are difficult and uncertain times – wars of empire, struggles for liberation, shaky markets, billowing debt, environmental degradation, pandemics and poverty of unimaginable proportions, and closer to home, negative social indicators at every hand. It’s as if humanity has decided to abolish itself as it chokes on its over-consumption and the violence employed to maintain it.<sup>11</sup>

Increasingly, I hear young couples question if bringing children into such a world is an ethical thing to do – something which never occurred to my

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<sup>10</sup> 1 Cor.15:12 *ff.*

<sup>11</sup> See Malcolm Muggeridge, *Living Through An Apocalypse*, address the Lausanne Congress on Evangelism, 1974: <http://www.malcolmmuggeridge.org/gargoyle/gargoyle-17-200801.pdf> Little has changed since – things are only more so.

generation which assumed it could change anything and create anything it wanted. Hope, especially for anyone under 35 years, has become something precious, as it becomes increasingly scarce.

Yesterday I spoke to both Rosie Fyfe and Jos Strengholt who, as we know, minister from within the centre of the “Arab Spring” – a spring that has rapidly turned to a bitter winter. Rosie spoke of the lack of ‘hope’ she sees throughout the region, with Christians in the vanguard of those trying by any means to leave, despite the amazing witness of many who remain. She called us to renew our prayers for our sister church in Egypt in particular.

Jos too spoke of finding hope in “the midst of despair and the struggle of daily life, in a country gone crazy and without a sense of the future. It is great to know”, he said, “that our Lord went to greater depths to bring us to our Father, and rose again over-coming sin and death and all that follows” in their train.

For, indeed, whatever our situation, personally or as a society, the claim of Easter is that we *can* live life hopefully, and we can do so for a good reason.

Leslie Newbigin, author of *Proper Confidence*,<sup>12</sup> is reported to have said,

“I am neither an optimist nor a pessimist,  
Jesus Christ rose from the dead  
and that makes all the difference.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt, and Certainty in Christian Discipleship*, Eerdmans, 1995.

<sup>13</sup> Newbigin is quoted extensively on the net as having said this, yet direct quote is hard to find! *TB supplied*

## **Resurrection and renewal of humanity**

This is not just an assertion of romantic optimism in the face of the facts, it is to do with hope *grounded* upon an *event* – an event attested to by reliable eyewitnesses.<sup>14</sup> They may differ in detail but they agree in their attestation to the centrality of that one event. That event is the *empty tomb*; the resurrection of Jesus from the dead and the promise of new life it brings with it. This is no “pie in the sky when you die” kind of hope. It is a hope which enables us to live life anew, starting from *now*.

When those women first discovered the empty tomb they were not believed – not even by their friends and fellow disciples of their failed messiah.<sup>15</sup> Yet by the time of Emperor Constantine’s death some 300 years later, their simple testimony had subverted an empire and was transforming a civilisation.

It is a sign of the sea-change of the time that Constantine wrote in his ‘Oration’: “This indeed is heavenly wisdom, to choose to be injured rather than injure, and when it is necessary, to suffer evil rather than do it.”<sup>16</sup> In such a declaration (though himself far from perfect), Constantine had entered a world without sacrifice to the old gods of sensuality, greed, power, brutality and trickery. Instead he had embraced a faith in the vulnerable, crucified yet *risen* Christ, a faith that said there was an end to sacrifice to the tired failed gods, and the beginning of a better way.

It is the assertion of our Gospel and the testimony of history, then, that the renewal of our society, indeed, of the whole earth, begins not with a

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<sup>14</sup> Again, see Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses...*

<sup>15</sup> Jn.20:25-27; Lk.24:10-11.

<sup>16</sup> Peter Leithart, *Defending Constantine: The Twilight of an Empire and the Dawn of Christendom*, IVP Academic 2004. P.TB supplied.

social or political programme, nor with a mass movement but, rather, when we – each one of us, individually – discover we are part of that body of people who love to assemble, who love to pray and praise, a people who say as one:

**He is risen indeed!!**

**(and that makes all the difference)**