

Sermon on Sunday 18 April 2021

by Rev. Alan Stewart

Life has the last word

Resurrection: fact or fiction? That is, I think, a particularly unhelpful question.

Why? Because actually it diminishes resurrection; it demands we take sides where one insists on evidential proof, and the other is too easily dismissed as folklore or fairytale. Because the truth of resurrection cannot be grasped through forensics or persuasion or even story. Resurrection can only ever be comprehended by living it.

When post resurrection Jesus gatecrashes his friends locked-down in an upstairs room, they are understandably terrified. So understandably, Jesus' opening words are not 'Ta da!' or even 'You idiots!' but 'Shalom; Peace be with you'. He can see that they're in shock, that they can't begin to fathom what has and is happening. And so, to convince them that he's neither ghost, nor figment of their collective over-active imaginations, he proves his physical nature by asking them first for something to eat, and then by inviting them to touch the actual scars of his hands and his feet; the wounds of his love. This is indeed the man who died, incomprehensively alive. 'Life, Jim, but not quite as we know it'. For this resurrected body is the same but different; it eats fish, it walks through locked doors.

For many Christians this belief in a bodily resurrection; that Jesus physically rose from the dead is a non-negotiable; a deal-breaker. And, speaking personally, I'm convinced there's enough circumstantial and experiential evidence to lead me to the same

conclusion. Obviously, no CCTV footage exists, so it's a case of getting to 'beyond reasonable doubt'. But for those for whom that's a stumbling block, for those who just cannot accept that particular impossibility, I'd say 'don't stress'.

Jesus himself never seemed that bothered by orthodoxy; by believing the 'right' things. He didn't insist that everyone who tried to follow him believe the same things; subscribe to the same creed, sign up to the same statement of faith. And we can see those closest to him got almost everything wrong and then spent the rest of their lives trying to work it out. And, personally, I'm encouraged by that, because in the final analysis, we must know that we are all heretics. We must approach all God-talk with open minds and open hearts, and with shedloads of humility.

It's so important here to understand the difference between belief and faith. Believing the 'right' things about God is, of course, important. Often, however, too easily we make God in our own image and we read scripture through our own lens. So, let's refrain from judging one another. Like those first blown-away disciples in an upstairs room, let's be open to having our minds blown and our worldviews changed.

If we can hold lightly our belief and our disbelief, that's where encounter with the living Christ can take place.

Jesus' first followers needed to reassess the Jesus they thought they knew. In my life, that's something I've had to do as new insights land or new situations reveal themselves. There's that beautiful moment earlier on when Jesus first appears to Mary Magdalene in the garden and, in her grief, she fails to recognise him. And then just one word, her name spoken, 'Mary', unlocks something, opens her eyes to see him. And, interestingly, the first

thing he says is 'Do not cling to me'. I interpret that as 'Do not cling to the 'old' me'.

We are called to faith in the resurrection. And faith is different to belief. Having faith isn't about subscribing to a set of beliefs, it's about trusting that Christ is alive, however we understand that; trusting that he is to be trusted; trusting that he will help us unlock the scriptures as he did in that upstairs room; trusting that the power of resurrection is already within and available to us.

Resurrection is not confined to one ancient near-Eastern man two millennia ago. The resurrection of Jesus is a vindication that life has the last word, that love always wins. It's the beginning of a new history. Resurrection has, of course, always been written into the very fabric of existence. Out of death and decay, comes life. And the resurrection of Jesus sets this transformative power into motion on both a cosmic scale and the micro-scale of my life and yours.



I said earlier, the resurrection can only be understood through living it. The East Indian Jesuit Pratap Naik writes: "Each time we love again after having our love rejected, we share in the power of the resurrection. Each time we hope again after having our hope smashed to pieces, we share in the power of the

resurrection. Each time we pick up the pieces, wipe our tears, face the sun and start again, we share in the power of the resurrection."

Those disciples locked down in that upstairs room had now to make sense of the resurrection for themselves. For two days they had lived with fear and regret, with grief and failure. What now does this truth of resurrection, that truth that life has the last word, that love always wins; what does this say to their past, their present, their future?

In what ways I wonder have we, like them, been locked down this year? In hopelessness? Anxiety? Disappointment? Self-doubt? Loneliness? Inertia? In fear of missing out or going out?

And in what ways have we experienced Christ walking through those locked doors? Where have we sensed his presence, his faithfulness, felt his holding?

Jesus' proof of resurrection was to show his hands and his feet, the wounds of his love. If the world is to know the power of the resurrection and the love of the resurrected one, then it too must see his hands and feet, the wounds of his love. How? Through these hands and these feet?

Famously Jesus once said, 'I am the resurrection'. I am the life that has the last word, the love that ultimately wins. Our question then today, is how will I be the resurrection? How will I live this truth out through these hands, these feet?

Luke 24. 36-48

³⁶ *While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you."*³⁷ *They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost.* ³⁸ *He said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds?"* ³⁹ *Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a*

ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.”⁴⁰ When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet.⁴¹ And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, “Do you have anything here to eat?”⁴² They gave him a piece of broiled fish,⁴³ and he took it and ate it in their presence.⁴⁴ He said to them, “This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.”⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.⁴⁶ He told them, “This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day,⁴⁷ and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things.