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Sermon

The Resurrection

1 Corinthians 15:12-20

13th February 2022

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Our Lectionary readings are taking us through the first Epistle to the Corinthians. For Eleanor's funeral on Tuesday, Don chose to read a substantial portion of Chapter 15 expressing the Hope of the Resurrection. Our readings for these next three weeks cover the same ground and I have decided to make a mini-series on chapter 15 and the resurrection since it is an important foundation for our faith and not always clearly understood.

The Resurrection of Jesus.

In verses 1-11 Paul has already covered in summary the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus. I need to pick up what has gone before. Here Paul reminds us of what the gospel is. This is what we have faith in; where our confidence lies as Christians. The essence of the good news is that Jesus Christ died for our sins. He truly died and was buried. Then on the third day he rose again from the dead back to life. This was a real body not a ghost, not imagination. This fulfils what was prophesied in the Old Testament about the Messiah. This was not some wishful thinking or the fantasy or hallucination of a grief-stricken mind, for he was seen by many witnesses, separately and even by 500 people at the same time.

Lee Strobel is a well-known author who was an investigative journalist for the Chicago Tribune. He was a convinced atheist who was horrified when his wife became a Christian. He set out to disprove Christianity to her only to be convinced by the evidence himself. Some of his books are in our Church library: "The Case for Christ", "The Case for Easter", etc.

He consulted numerous experts: legal, historical, scientific, psychological, theological on all aspects of the case for the resurrection. Like others who have sought to disprove the resurrection of Christ before him, he was convinced and became to be a follower of Christ.

In his book, "The Case for the Resurrection"¹, he outlines what the preeminent scholars on the resurrection, Dr Michael Licona and Dr Gary Habermas call the minimal facts for the resurrection of Christ. These are only those pieces of evidence which virtually all scholars would accept including atheistic scholars and historians. I cannot go into full detail now but in summary:

¹ Published by Zondervan.

1. Jesus was killed by crucifixion.

James Tabor a skeptic writes, "I think we need to have no doubt that given Jesus' execution by Roman crucifixion he was truly *dead*."²

There is the testimony of all four gospels as well as non-Christian sources of the day: the Roman historian Tacitus; the Jewish historian, Josephus; the Jewish Talmud; the Greek satirist, Lucian all record the death of Jesus.

Dr Licona says, "To deny the crucifixion and death of Jesus would get you laughed out to the academic world."

2. Jesus' disciples believed that he rose and appeared to them.

There are three strands to this:

- a. Paul's testimony about the disciples
- b. The oral traditions of the early church
- c. The written works of the early church.

a. In this chapter 15, Paul wrote knowing apostles personally and reporting their experiences of meeting with the risen Jesus.

b. The early Church passed on what had happened orally at first and we get instances of these being recorded in scripture verbatim. These are very significant because they are well established statements even earlier than the written works in which they are recorded. The statement of verses 3-7 is one of these recordings. Paul writing in 55AD is recording an even earlier agreed statement most likely received from Peter and James within 5 years of the crucifixion.

This is far too early for legends to have developed – that takes many years and the original witnesses need no longer to be around to correct any distortions.

There are other examples of the Apostles preaching recorded in the New Testament with the consistent statements that Jesus died and rose again to life.

c. The written sources are of course the New Testament. It is important to understand the gospels were all written within 70 years of Jesus' life which is an amazingly short interval. For example, the earliest and best records of Alexander the Great were not written until at least 400 years after his death.

Then there are the writings of the Apostolic Fathers – the immediate disciples of the apostles whose writings reflect the teaching of the Apostles who instructed them. Bishop Clement who was ordained by Peter wrote in his letter to the Corinthians church in the first century, "Therefore, having received complete certainty caused by the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ they went preaching the good news that the Kingdom of God is about to come."³

Similarly, Polycarp, appointed Bishop of Smyrna by the Apostle John mentions the resurrection of Jesus five times in a letter to the Philippian church.

And this belief in the risen Christ was such that the Apostles and the disciples were prepared to die for it as truth. There is an important distinctive here over martyrs of other faiths. They were not only dying for what they believed but in the case of the Apostles for what they knew. They had met the risen Christ, not just heard about him. They had seen him, touched him, heard him, been fed by him, watched him eat. They knew for a fact that the resurrection had happened and for that truth they were prepared to die.

3. The Conversion of Paul

Paul was the chief persecutor of the early church. He had an encounter with the risen Christ which turned him around radically. Three days later he was preaching Christ in the synagogue. He suffered for his faith in Christ indeed did die for it.

² *The Jesus Dynasty*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 2006, p230 (original emphasis)

³ 1 Clement 42:3

4. *The Conversion of James*

James was the half-brother of Jesus. He was not a disciple of Jesus during his ministry. It was only after the resurrection that he had an encounter with the risen Christ and was convinced. He is another sceptic who was converted by a personal encounter and was willing to die for his convictions.

5. *The Empty Tomb*

a. The crucifixion was in Jerusalem and the gospel was preached in Jerusalem seven weeks later. If it was not true, the locals could say the body is in the tomb. That did not happen.

b. The enemies attested to the empty tomb by claiming that the body was stolen away. That shows the tomb was empty. The idea that the disciples stole the body and yet were prepared to die for the false story they had created is ludicrous.

b. The evidence of the women who were first at the tomb. If it were a false story, they would never have had women as the witnesses because in both Roman and Jewish culture, the testimony of women was either invalid or considered questionable.

There is far more which can be said in favour of the resurrection. But those five points are the minimal arguments were all points are accepted by the most sceptical of scholars.

N.T. Wright wrote, "It is no good falling back on 'science' as having disproved the possibility of resurrection. Any real scientist will tell you that science observes what normally happens; the Christian case is precisely that what happened to Jesus is not what normally happens. For my part, as a historian I prefer the elegant, essentially simple solution rather than the one that fails to include all the data: to say that early Christians believed that Jesus had been bodily raised from the dead, and to account for this belief by saying that they were telling the truth."⁴

That addresses the evidence that Jesus rose bodily from dead.

The Resurrection of the Dead

Our reading today from 1 Corinthians 15, concerns the suggestion that there is no resurrection. It seems some people were saying there would be no general resurrection. The General Resurrection is understood from the New Testament to be the rising of the dead to a restored integrity of body and soul. In some sense the identity of the body is preserved, yet it is so changed and refined as to be fit for the new surroundings of the future life. This will occur at the second coming of Christ.⁵

Jesus himself addressed the question of the resurrection. It was generally believed in the first century, but there was one school of Jewish thought (the Sadducees) which rejected the idea of the resurrection of the dead. When they challenged Jesus about this he answered:

But about the resurrection of the dead--have you not read what God said to you, ³² 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not the God of the dead but of the living"⁶

The past or present tense of the verb matters! He cited the time when God called Moses at the burning bush. God said, I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob. But those men had passed away – Abraham about 450 years beforehand. God did not say, "I was the God of Abraham", but "I am the God of Abraham." Jesus continued by saying, "God is not the God of dead but of the living. For to him all are alive."

On another occasion he said:

Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear [the Son of Man's] voice and come out--those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned.⁷

⁴ Marcus Borg and N.T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions*, San Francisco, Harper Collins, 1999, p124-125.

⁵ Unger's Bible Dictionary, 3rd ed, 1985, Editor Merrill Unger, Moody Press, "Resurrection of the Body", p921

⁶ Matthew 22:31-32

⁷ John 5:28-29

Paul tied together very clearly the promise of future resurrection with Christ having been resurrected. If there is no resurrection, then even Christ could not have risen. And if he did not rise, he was nothing but a deluded teacher who failed. The gospel would collapse and there would be no salvation.

Paul drives this faulty thinking to its logical conclusion saying that if Christ did not rise from the dead, then he, Paul, and the other Apostles were giving false evidence about God.

And then Christians would be the people most to be pitied because we would have put our trust in a falsehood. In the service of that belief we have sacrificed, maybe suffered, some were martyred – all for a lie.

The truth of the resurrection is vital to Christianity.

Then in verse 20, Paul proclaims: “ But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.”

Just as Jesus was raised from the dead into a resurrection body which will never die, so will we be raised to new life in resurrection bodies. He is the firstfruit of the resurrection harvest. The firstfruit of a harvest is the first of the produce to ripen. It indicates what is to come. When we hear the accounts of Jesus’ body after the resurrection, we get an idea of what our resurrection bodies will be like.

That is what Paul wrote in his Epistle to the Philippians:

But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.⁸

Let me give the last words to our Lord. When he was speaking to Martha when her brother Lazarus was dead three days in the tomb, he said to her:

Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies;²⁶ and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"⁹

Do you believe this?

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⁸ Philippians 3:20-21

⁹ John 11:25-26