



Sermon

Easter – 31/3/2024

“We are witnesses”

Acts 10:34-43; John 20:1-18; 1 Cor 15:1-11

© 2024 The Revd Ian Hardcastle

We have just heard the accounts of three Apostles giving their testimonies to the resurrection of Jesus.

1. John, the writer of the gospel of John, was a close friend and devoted follower of Jesus through his earthly ministry. He wrote of the discovery of the empty tomb.
2. Peter, the leader of the disciples, was present as John described. From the Book of Acts we have heard a summary of the gospel message as he preached to the Roman Centurion and his household.
3. Paul writing to the church in Corinth told them again the essence of the gospel and gave evidence of the many eye-witnesses to the truth of the resurrection.

Legal-historical proof

When considering these matters, people do not always realise that to prove historical events is different from scientific proofs. Historical events are not repeatable as scientific proof demands. No, the basis for establishing historical truthfulness is the legal-historical proof. Lord Caldecote who was Lord Chief Justice of England 1940-1946 said,

“The claims of Jesus Christ, namely his resurrection has lead me as often as I have tried to examine the evidence to believe it is a fact beyond dispute.”

John's Evidence

John told that after the crucifixion, on a Friday, Joseph of Arimathea and some of women, took the body of Jesus and placed it in Joseph's own tomb and made a start to the burial procedures. They stopped when evening came and it was the Sabbath. On the Sunday morning soon after dawn, about 40 hours after the death, the women returned to complete this process. Instead of finding it guarded by soldiers as they expected, it was open and abandoned. Dismayed they hurried back to find the disciples. Two of them who ran to the tomb to see what had happened.

When they went in and what they saw convinced them that this was not the work of grave robbers but Jesus had returned to life.

What was it?

“He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen.”

The head cloth was a large handkerchief which was rolled up and tied around the face to hold the jaw closed. We are told that it was not with the other strips but separate. Just as it was when on the body. The strips of linen were around the body, the handkerchief was around the face with the neck separating them.

There was a handkerchief which had been twisted into a band and tied around the face, it is found lying separately from the other strips of cloth which had been around the body. John Stott commented,

“It is not hard to imagine the sight which greeted the eyes of the apostles when they reached the tomb: the stone slab, the collapsed graveclothes, the shell of the head-cloth and the gap between the two. No wonder they ‘saw and believed.’ A glance at these graveclothes proved the reality, and indicated the nature, of the resurrection. They had been neither touched nor folded nor manipulated by any human being. They were like a discarded chrysalis from which the butterfly has emerged.”

When John saw the grave clothes he was convinced. This was not the action of grave robbers. Something inexplicable had happened to the body – Jesus had risen.

Remember these are eye-witness accounts. The writer of the gospel was one of the two men. The other was Peter, who is quoted in the reading from Acts.

God raised Jesus from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen ... by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.¹

There are two disciples who saw and believed.

Mary Magdalene met Jesus who came to her and asked her why she was crying and for whom she was looking.

By the way, when God asks a question it is not because he needs to know the answer. It is to prompt us to think about, believe or declare something. I wonder if you have experienced that in your relationship with him? If you do hear a question from him, realize the answer is for you to hear.

Mary still didn't realize who it was, until he spoke to her, "Mary." Suddenly, she recognized the voice and knew it was he. He was alive again! Now she had no doubt – everything has changed – "I have seen the Lord!"

John, the gospel writer, has given us three eyewitness accounts here to help us believe. He wrote at the end of this chapter (v30):

Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

Let's not wriggle around and think these are made up stories – the writers do not allow us that option. Peter says in one of his letters,

"We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eye-witnesses of his majesty." ²

Peter's Evidence

In the Acts reading, when Peter preached the gospel he also emphasized that he was a witness. He spoke of the healings and miracles he had seen Jesus do and his teaching before he died. He had seen that Jesus was executed on a Roman cross. But he was also a witness to the fact that God had raised Jesus from the dead. And furthermore, he and others had meet with Jesus, eaten with him, talked to him after he was alive again.

Now you may not believe John and Peter. You may scoff from a position of sophisticated unbelief at the idea of resurrection. There are many who flatly disbelieve and rationalise away their disbelief. Let us then turn to the passage from 1 Corinthians 15 for our third writer, Paul of Tarsus.

Paul's Testimony

He says that he is going to remind them of what he preached to them when they became Christians. In effect he is asking us today: Do you know you are saved by this gospel? Is that a firm foundation for you?

Do you just believe that there is a God or do you know and trust the living God? It really is important: Paul says it is of the first importance – it is the means of salvation.

It has been deduced that Paul must have been converted in about 35AD just 2 years after the crucifixion, so he would have received his teaching very early indeed in church history and this letter was written in about 55 AD – this is original teaching essentially.

Heart of the Gospel

¹ Acts 10:40-43

² 2 Peter 1:16

How would you summarise the gospel of Jesus Christ? How does Paul? Verses 3 & 4: Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.

That's it! Let's break that description down into its components:

Christ died and was buried

He was buried – he really died!

1. Roman soldiers were experts at killing and their very lives depended on doing a good job. If an execution were bungled, their lives were forfeit. Similarly, the guards on duty at the tomb risked a death sentence for dereliction of duty if they allowed anyone to steal the body.
2. We need to understand that drastic nature of scourging & crucifixion. Many died from scourging alone, it didn't just to lacerate the skin but it stripped the flesh off the bones and even tore into the organs beneath. Then crucifixion was an agony of being suspended, gasping for breath in the blazing sun, until one died of exhaustion or drowned in the build-up of fluid in the lungs.
3. To be sure he was dead, the guards thrust a spear into his side. The report was blood and water came out. Medical analysis says that the spear would have pierced the pericardium, the sack surrounding the heart. Since they saw blood and water, it means the blood had already separated into plasma and red cells. That is good evidence of death - it was not a pretence, a swoon or a coma.
4. In fact when Pilate was told that Jesus had died, he was surprised and sent to have the report checked. They were doubly sure of this death.

...for our sins

Paul states this death was for our sins. Isaiah prophesied in 53:4-6:

- Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows...
- He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.
- The LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Is 53:9, 11

- ... the LORD makes his life a guilt offering...
- My righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities.

Jesus died to deal with our sins. God, in Christ, paid the penalty - satisfying his own justice.

He was raised on the third day

This was not a ghost or a vision – he was solid; he ate with them on three recorded occasions. He had them touch him to reassure them of his solid nature; he told Thomas to thrust his hand into the wound sites.

Nor was it a hallucination or there result of hysteria. Hallucinations are not crowd events. That is, you do not get mass-hallucinations only individuals can do it. Hysteria does not continue for 40 days and stop suddenly. James, Thomas and later Saul were all initially anti or sceptical and yet they all encountered him and were convinced.

The First fruits offering

On Thursday, we held a Christian Passover dinner where we saw how Jesus had fulfilled the Passover himself. His rising to life on the third day is a fulfilment another Jewish festival: the First Fruits wave offering.

The Jewish Law required that the first ears of the harvest (which was a barley crop) were to be offered to God as the firstfruit of the harvest (Leviticus 23:10-14). This was done on the day after the Sabbath in the Passover. So that was on the Sunday.

On that day, the Law required the first of the harvest to be offered to God and Jesus rose from the dead – the first of the harvest of souls into the Resurrection. Paul references this when he wrote in verse 20,

Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.³

Witnesses

Paul continues by citing the many witnesses to Jesus' resurrection. He lists the women at the tomb, Peter, the apostles, 500 people at one time, James the brother of the Lord then all the apostles presumably at the time of the Ascension. These meetings continued over a period of 40 days.

The Change in the Disciples

The change in the disciples is striking: they moved from terror to courage. They had denied him, fled and locked themselves away for fear of the authorities. They suddenly switched to preaching publicly that Jesus had risen to the crowds and challenging the authorities.

- If they knew the resurrection was a fiction would they be motivated to such courageous actions?
- Would the Church have started or grown as it did so strongly?
- Would those close followers of Jesus have been ready to give their lives for this faith if they knew it was a fiction or a fraud? All except John died as martyrs.
- Would many priests have converted from Judaism with the very high cost of going against the establishment and losing their positions?
- Some say it is just a legend, but we should note that legends need time to develop, but this was instantaneous.

So what?

What does this mean for individuals then?

- Paul was zealous for Judaism; he had persecuted and tried to destroy the early church. Then he had a revelation of Jesus and he was utterly convinced.
- Thomas turned from doubt and anger to calling Jesus, "my Lord & my God" - appalling blasphemy for a Jew to say – unless it were true!

What about us, what does the resurrection mean to us?

- It changes how we understand life – turning our world upside down!
- For us too it means – Jesus is God just as claimed – his words are vindicated.
- Therefore sin is dealt with. There is life after death. We are able to enter eternal life.

Peter spoke of Jesus' commission to his followers, to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead.

Peter also said, "Everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name." He died for us, he rose again to life. He went through that so that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through him.

The resurrection offers us hope both because Jesus is with us and because we have seen that God will take crisis and even death and make something far better out of it all.

Is there something missing in your life? Is there something broken or useless in your life? Do you long to know his forgiveness and life.

Bring it to Jesus for he says, "I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever!"⁴

Unless otherwise noted, all scriptural quotations are taken from the *Holy Bible: New International Version*® ©1972, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Societies. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.

³ 1 Cor 15:20

⁴ Revelation 1:18