

Sunday, 27 March

## The Day Of Resurrection.

John 20:16 - Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher).

The supreme credential which authenticates the claim of Jesus to deity was His resurrection from the dead. Five times He predicted that He would die, how He would die and that three days later He would rise from the dead and appear to His disciples. This claim was easy to verify. It either happened or it didn't.

The resurrection is a crucial and foundational subject. If the resurrection happened, other miracles are not difficult. If we are sure Jesus rose then questions about God, His character and our relationship to Him are answered.

Did Jesus rise from the dead? What is the evidence? Both friends and enemies of the Christian faith have recognized the resurrection to be the foundation stone of the faith. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, some of whom said "there is no resurrection of the dead". His response was: "If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain." (1 Corinthians 15:12-14). Paul rested his case on the resurrection. Either He did or He didn't rise from the dead.

If He did, it was the most sensational event in history, and we have answers to profound questions like: Where have we come from? Why are we here? Where are we going? If Christ rose we know that God exists, we know what God is like and we may know Him in personal experience.

But, if Christ did not rise, Christianity has no objective validity. The martyrs, 167,000 of them annually at present, are deluded fools.

The attack on Christianity by its enemies has concentrated on the resurrection. Unbelief was as fashionable in the 18th century as it is today. Then, two able young men, Gilbert West and Lord George Lyttelton, went to Oxford. They were determined to attack the Christian faith. Lyttelton set out to prove that Saul of Tarsus was never converted to Christianity and West to demonstrate that Jesus never rose from the grave.

After some time they met to discuss their findings. Both were embarrassed, for they had come independently to similar conclusions. Lyttelton found that Saul did become a radically new person through his conversion to Christianity; and West found that the evidence that Jesus rose was convincing. He wrote: "Observations on the History and Evidences of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ." It was published in 1747 and he quoted Ecclesiasticus 11:7: "Blame not before you have examined the truth." [1]

Thomas Arnold, headmaster of Rugby, who was once a Professor of History at Oxford, wrote: "I have been used for many years to study the history of other times, and to examine and weigh the evidence of those who have written about them; and I know of no fact in the history of people which is proved by better and fuller evidence... to the understanding of a fair inquirer, than the great sign that God has given us, that Christ died and rose from the dead." [2]





In the 1930s a journalist, Frank Morison, was convinced that miracles did not happen though he admired the character of Jesus. When he studied the evidence, he wrote his book: "Who Moved the Stone?" and with great honesty entitled the first chapter: "The Book that Refused to be Written." [3]

Lord Darling, formerly Lord Chief Justice of England, wrote: "We, as Christians, are asked to take a very great deal on trust: the teachings, for example, and the miracles of Jesus. If we had to take all on trust, I, for one, should be sceptical. The crux of the problem of whether Jesus was or was not what he proclaimed Himself to be, must surely depend on the truth or otherwise of the resurrection. On that greatest point we are not merely asked to have faith. In its favour as a living truth there exists such overwhelming evidence, positive and negative, factual and circumstantial, that no intelligent jury in the world could fail to bring in the verdict that the resurrection story is true." [4]

Sir Edward Clarke, a High Court Judge gives an interesting perspective on examining the evidence when he writes: "As a lawyer I have made a prolonged study of the evidence for the events of Easter Day. To me the evidence is conclusive, and over and over again in the High Court I have secured the verdict on evidence not nearly so compelling. As a lawyer I accept the Gospel evidence unreservedly as the testimony of truthful people to facts that they were able to substantiate."

"It is not too much to say," wrote Bishop Westcott, one of England's greatest New Testament scholars, "that there is no single historical incident better or more variously attested than the resurrection of Christ." [5]

When the Athenians heard about the resurrection of the dead some of them scoffed (Acts 17:32), but others told Paul, "We will hear you again about this."

## WHAT IS THE EVIDENCE?

We can summarise it in 4 statements:

### 1. The tomb was empty.

The women were dumbfounded to discover that the body of the Lord had disappeared. Then the apostles began to preach Jesus and the resurrection. That would have been impossible if people could look into the tomb and see the body of Jesus there.

There are 6 explanations of the empty tomb.

#### a. The women went to the wrong tomb.

It was dark - Luke says "at early dawn." Two women had seen where Joseph and Nicodemus had put the body. The women went for a practical purpose - with spices to complete the anointing. They were in a hurry because of the Sabbath. Some twist the natural sense of "He is not here" and "Look at the place where they put Him" as if they were being pointed to a different tomb.

#### b. The swoon theory.

Some say Jesus didn't die on the cross but revived in the cool tomb. But, the Centurion assured Pilate that Jesus was dead - a spear had been thrust in His side and blood and water came out. Perhaps the separation of the red and white corpuscles was a sign of a broken heart. How could He have survived for 36 hours without food, water or medical attention? How could He have removed the boulder? He lived for 40 days then disappeared. People are credulous to believe that.

c. Thieves stole the body.

This is conjecture. A Roman guard was there. If thieves came why did they leave the graveclothes and the valuable spices? What could have been a possible motive?

d. The disciples removed the body.

Matthew mentions this rumour - a deputation of Chief Priests and Pharisees had gone to Pilate to ask for a guard. (Matthew 27:62-4,28:11-15). It was unlikely that the guards slept. They would not be prepared to die for a fairy tale.

e. The Roman or Jewish authorities removed the body for safe custody.

This guess is also untenable. The Jews feared conversions and the Romans riots. They could have produced the body instead of using violence and arresting the apostles.

f. The body was raised by God.

We prefer the biblical account. The body of Christ was not removed by people, it was raised by God.

## 2. The Graveclothes were undisturbed.

This second statement of evidence is attested by Peter and John in John 20. They had first hand experience. John outran Peter. John went in and saw and believed. He saw the undisturbed clothes wrapped like a bandage. Nicodemus had brought 50 kilograms of spices which were in the linen clothes. A separate cloth for the head lay in a place by itself. This was a resurrection not a resuscitation. Jesus had gone into a new sphere of existence. It is as if the body had vapourised - like water or ice being turned into steam - as it was transmuted into something new. It passed through the clothes just as later through doors.

The weight of the spices caused the clothes to collapse. There was a gap at the face and neck. The napkin was wrapped together - twirled like a turban - and preserves in the Greek word the idea of a rounded shape. The clothes were like a discarded chrysalis from which a butterfly has emerged.

Mary Magdalene saw the two angels sitting at either end of the clothes. "He is not here. Come, see the place where He lay."

## 3. The Lord was Seen is the third statement.

There were eleven appearances to chosen witnesses: to Mary Magdalene; to the women returning from the tomb; to Peter; to the two disciples on the Emmaus Road; to the ten in the upper room; to the eleven including





Thomas; and to more than 500 people. Jesus was seen in Galilee by James; by disciples Peter, Thomas, Nathaniel, James and John by the lake; to many on the Mount of Olives; near Bethany at the time of the Ascension; and by Paul himself.

How can we explain these narratives? There are three possibilities: a) inventions; b) hallucinations; c) true.

#### a) Inventions

The accounts are sober and graphic. There are eye-witness touches in the race to the tomb and on the Emmaus Road. The accounts are vivid - they have an air of verisimilitude about them. If they are inventions they are bad ones. The Gospel accounts would have been more uniform, there would have been less emphasis on the doubts of the disciples and the inventor would surely have given a dramatic account of the moment of the resurrection. Mary Magdalene was a bad witness if they are inventions.

The apostles were convinced. There is certainty in the New Testament. The disciples may have been misled but they were not deliberately misleading people.

#### b) Were the appearances hallucinations?

Hallucinations are apparent perceptions by neurotic people. Peter and Thomas were not unbalanced.

In normal people hallucinations are the climax of a long period of wishful thinking and the circumstances of time and mood must be favourable. There was no expectant desire that He would rise in spite of the predictions. When they found the tomb empty they fled trembling and astonished. The disciples would not believe the report of the women. When Jesus stood among the disciples He said to them, "Peace be with you." They were startled and terrified and thought that they were seeing a ghost." (Luke 24:36-37). Thomas refused to believe.

#### c) The New Testament accounts are true. The Lord was seen.

### 4. The disciples were changed.

Many think that this is the greatest evidence. They are new and different people in Acts compared with the Gospels. The death of Jesus left them despondent, disillusioned and near to despair. In Acts they turned the world upside down or, as Archbishop William Temple said, really the right way up. What has made the change? The resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Peter denied Christ 3 times - he was dejected in the upper room. A few pages later Peter is preaching boldly on the stone steps outside the same room and 3,000 people accepted Christ and were baptized. Peter defies the Sanhedrin.

James the brother of our Lord did not believe (John 7:5) but he is with the disciples in Acts 1:14. Paul said: "The risen Jesus appeared to James."

The resurrection changed the Sabbath from Saturday to Sunday. It changed Saul to Paul. It established the Christian Church. Our Christian affirmation is still: "The Lord is risen" and our response is "The Lord is risen indeed." [6]

## **A PRAYER**

Almighty God, through Your Son Jesus Christ You overcame death and opened to us the gate of everlasting life; grant us so to die daily to sin, that we may evermore live with Him in the joy of His resurrection; who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God now and for ever. Amen. [7]

## **NOTES:**

[1] - Michael Green: *Man Alive*, IVP, London, 1967, pp.55-6.

[2] - Michael Green: *The Day Death Died*, IVP, Leicester, 1987, p.15.

[3] - Ibid. *Man Alive*, pp.54-55.

[4] - Ibid. *The Day Death Died*, p.15.

[5] - Op. Cit., p.37.

[6] - Sir Norman Anderson: *The Evidence for the Resurrection*, IVP, Leicester, 1950, pp.1-16.

[7] - Ibid. *A New Zealand Prayer Book*, p.593.

