

Resurrection – More Than a Concept

Last July, I was invited to lead a funeral service for a good friend. We were the same age, were in the same class at school, played for the same football team. Our paths crossed often and although we went on our own pathways of life, our friendship was always there.

So, I had many stories to tell the packed church about John, over our life's journey, and they were warmly received by just about the whole of the village who turned up to show their respect for someone who had become their local councillor and had been a friend to many.

As I finished John's eulogy, I wanted to finish it with words of hope that pointed to God. In Tarbert Parish Church there is a beautiful stained-glass window above the chancel, and the risen Christ is depicted on it, it has the words of the Apostle Paul, "Where is your sting death, grave where is your victory."

I was able then to gently say a few words around this visual image that the congregation were all now looking at. A few days after the service, someone commented on the local Facebook page, that they had always read the verse on the window but it has never been as poignant before.

"Where is your sting death, grave where is your victory"

I don't want to minimise the sting of death because many here today know that it is painful, and that it is the cruellest of all things. So, what is the Apostle Paul saying in these words?

Let us take a few moments to journey together this morning, and see if there is comfort and healing in the Apostle's words.

Sherlock Holmes' genius lay in his ability to find the best way of making sense of the clues, he discovers during the course of his investigation. All the clues cannot be right, he had to decide which is the best explanation of what is observed.

When those first disciples gathered at the early tomb, they tried to get their head around what had just happened; heir clues were no body, neatly folded grave clothes, a stone rolled away, no Jesus!

These clues slowly begin to give the disciples a new framework, a new map, a new way of looking at their world, and it comes through the resurrection of Jesus.

Without the resurrection of Jesus there would be no Christian faith. It would have died on a cross with the man called Jesus.

CS Lewis wrote, "I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen, not only because I see it, but because by it, I see everything else."

The resurrection of Jesus is like a light shining into the darkness.

The resurrection holds that there is a door hidden in the scheme of things that opens into another world; a new way of understanding, a new way of living, and a new way of hoping.

This morning, we have gathered to celebrate the greatest event of human history. If the resurrection of Jesus is true, then no scientific discovery will outmatch this one – eternal life!

This is why the Apostle Paul can say, *O death where is your sting, O grave where is your victory?* because he came to see that the resurrection of Jesus changed everything – how we live and how we die and the sting of death is softened for the Christian because we have this great hope that we will meet our loved one again. Death has not the final word. Jesus has the final word.

The resurrection of Jesus gives us a key, a doorway into another world, into the Kingdom of God. It opens our minds to grasp that we can have a relationship with the One who created us; a God who can inspire us, transform us, and accompany us on the journey of life.

That was to be the experience of those first disciples, who encountered the resurrection. If you need proof, look at how the resurrection changed their lives; from being cowards to being men and women willing to die for their faith, only the power of the resurrection could do this.

As we look back over 2000 years of resurrection faith, we must be encouraged that the Christian faith began at the empty tomb, and has spread all over the world; today 56% of adults— throughout the world - believe Jesus was God – 26% of other religions say that he was a religious or spiritual leader like Mohammed or the Buddha but 56% believe he was resurrected.

Faith is not a blind leap into the dark but a joyful discovery of a bigger picture. When I climb the Campsies in the early morning, and as I begin my walk, the darkness suddenly lifts as the sun rises and it opens up a new world of wonder and amazement. That is what the resurrection does to our faith.

I am encouraged by those brilliant academics like CS Lewis, Prof Alister McGrath and many more believe in the resurrection of Jesus and not only believe but have committed their lives to following Jesus.

Let us sing...

Be still for the presence of the Lord...

Resurrection – So What?

What does the Resurrection – mean for you and me? Does it have any significance?

The Apostle Paul writes, “If it's only for this life that we have hope in Christ, then we are to be pitied more than all men. But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.” Cor 15 v 19,20

When Saul of Tarsus met with the resurrected Jesus on the road to Damascus his life changed. In a twinkling of an eye, his framework of the world looked so much different. He entered God's Kingdom through the resurrection.

At least three things changed!

What changed? Identity – Who am I?

Firstly, his Identity. Superficially he changed his name from Saul to Paul but something bigger had happened to him.

From being a person who was filled with rage and envy against those who were calling themselves Followers of the Way. He became their greatest advocate.

Why?

He discovered, through the resurrection, that he had a new relationship with God. No longer was it about being subject to the Jewish law; it was now about faith and grace. Paul could now say, that he is a new creation...

Identity is something given, not something achieved, and Paul along with the early disciples was to discover this new identity in Christ. Jesus was no longer with them physically, but he was now with them spiritually, and he

brings them into a new relationship with his Heavenly Father. Everything had changed! Christ was living in them!

Our most famous Father of the early Church, St Augustine, was to discover this, some 350 years later, and he reflected on his new relationship and identity with God and he wrote in his book, "You have made us for yourself and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in you." He came to that place of understanding that we are not fully human until we exist in relationship with God.

The resurrection gives us a new identity. It changes who we are before God. It brings us into a dynamic relationship with our Heavenly Father. Today we celebrate this relationship and we praise God for it. Resurrection – so what? Through it we have our identity in Jesus.

What changed? Value – Do I matter?

Secondly, Saul came to realise that he was a child of God.

He saw in the death and resurrection of Jesus that God had committed himself to this world and that God was in solidarity with humanity and that God valued him.

The resurrection of Jesus gives us value and tells us that we matter.

Paul was to realise that our value does not depend upon or reflect on our own achievements or what we can bring to God; instead, our value comes in the esteem in which we are held by God.

As we stand today before the empty tomb, the question of our value may come to mind, and it speaks clearly of how God values us.

The medieval Christian writer and mystic Julian of Norwich famously put it, "Enfolded in the love of Christ, which brings us a new security, identity, and value. Once we see ourselves as enfolded by Christ, we come to think of ourselves in a new way – as those who are valued, welcomed, and loved." The Resurrection assures us that God values us.

The psalmist recognised the value that God attributes to us.

Psalm 8

*"When I consider your Heavens,
the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars,*

*which you have set in place,
4 what is mankind that you are mindful of them,
human beings that you care for them?^[c]*

*5 You have made them^[d] a little lower than the angels^[e]
and crowned them^[f] with glory and honour.”*

The resurrection restores God's glory and honour upon us.

What changed? Purpose – Why am I here?

The resurrection gives us a purpose.

To the atheist we are here by accident, we are the product of an indifferent cosmic happenstance. But contrast that with the Christian perspective that we are here for a purpose.

Go to humanist funeral service and there will be no hope for eternity; go to a Christian service and hope will sound out loud and clear.

When Paul was changed by the risen Christ, he suddenly found that there was a reason for his existence, and that was to serve God through Jesus.

Our purpose in life, is found in following Christ, walking in his footsteps, imitating his ways.

The journey in the Christian life, is a journey towards a purposeful goal, not just the end of the road but to a new Jerusalem, which is our true destiny.

When we enter the Christian faith through the resurrection, our lives turn around, and we become people willing to serve and be like Christ to our world.

On this Resurrection Sunday, I invite you to find in the resurrection of Jesus someone who gives you an identity as a child of God – You are His; someone who gives you value, for you are greatly loved; and someone who gives you a purpose to spend your life in devotion and service to the living God.

The cross of Jesus and his resurrection saves us for all eternity. That is why as a Christian minister, I can point people to the grace of God in their deepest need and that's why the Apostle could look death in the face and say, *where is your sting, grave is where your victory?* thanks be to God who gives us the victory through Christ.

Amen.

