

EASTER REFLECTION

Is the Resurrection True?

Picture the scene. Jesus is just a few weeks away from the end of his earthly ministry. He is talking to his disciples, before his final journey to Jerusalem. He says to them, 'Who do people say that I am?' The disciples must have wondered what was coming. 'Well, some say you're John the Baptist, others Elijah, or one of the prophets come back to life.' 'And what about you', continues Jesus, 'who do you say that I am?'

As is so often the case, it is Peter who speaks up and says, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God'.

'Who do you say that I am?' The question challenged the disciples all those years ago. It still challenges us today. The answer we give to that question will affect everything else that we do - what we believe about God, what we think, how we live.

Now fast forward a few weeks - to the Sunday after Easter - the Sunday after the resurrection. There, in the upper room, is that same group of disciples. By now, the truth of the resurrection is beginning to sink in. They have seen their risen Lord. He has come back to life. They believe. All, that is, except one. Thomas hadn't been with them on the first Easter evening, when Jesus had appeared to them. When they told Thomas that they had seen Jesus, he was sceptical. He had asserted that he needed to see Jesus for himself before he would believe. And now, a week later, he got his proof. Jesus stood before him and said, 'Thomas, put your finger in the nail hole.' See for yourself. Thomas got his proof. His response was to fall to his knees and cry, 'My Lord and my God.'

Thomas got his proof. But what about us? What evidence do we have for the truth of the resurrection?

At first hearing, it does take some believing, doesn't it? Can we believe in the Resurrection? What evidence do we have?

First, there's the evidence of the empty tomb. Early in the morning, the women went to the tomb and they found the stone rolled away. The tomb was empty. No body has ever been found. 'He is not here, he has risen,' said the angel. People have always put forward all kinds of theories that seek to deny the resurrection. But are they really creditable? Let's examine a few.

Theory 1. Jesus didn't die, he simply fell into a coma, and three days, he revived.

But, think about the story of the Passion. Remember how Jesus suffered. He was beaten to a pulp with a leather strap – beaten so severely that many men didn't even survive to be crucified.

He was nailed to a cross - one of the most painful, and barbaric forms of torture ever devised.

He was laid in a cold empty tomb from Friday afternoon till Sunday, with a massive stone rolled over the front of it. No doctors; no intensive care unit; no medication.

After all that, is it really possible that he could then be revived, just jump up and be walking, with full strength - not only around the garden, but right across the city? It just doesn't add up. By any definition of dead, Jesus was well and truly dead.

Theory 2. some-one stole the body. But who?

Did the disciples steal the body?

How could the disciples have done it? They were too terrified. They were frightened for their own lives. Could they really have broken into the tomb that was guarded, enclosed by a stone that would need at least two men to move it, stolen the body and just walked off with it, and thus perpetrated the biggest hoax in human history?

And let's remember, there were eleven of them, and at least ten of them died a martyr's death – simply because they stuck to their story and preached the resurrection. Is it really plausible that in the years ahead, not a single one of them would have broken ranks, and under threat of torture and death, not said a single word to doubt the truth of the resurrection? And you can be sure that if one of them had doubted the truth of this story, we would know about it. Somebody would have seized upon it.

And what's more, how can we account for the transformation that came over them? They were a group of broken and dejected men, hiding behind a locked door in fear of their own death. And yet, just 50 days later, they were out on the streets proclaiming the truth of the resurrection to anyone who would listen. They preached with such intensity that the number of believers increased like wild fire. Could they really have based the rest of their earthly lives and ministry upon a lie?

Did the Jewish leaders steal the body?

The Jewish authorities certainly have motive. They wanted to silence Jesus, how much more so did they want to scotch rumours of the resurrection and so strangle the infant church. So did the Jewish leaders take the body, for fear of the crowds?

But had they taken the body of Jesus, then surely, they would have produced it once stories of the resurrection got out. They, of all people, would have used their evidence to disprove the resurrection, and stopped the early church in its tracks. But they couldn't, because they didn't have a body.

Did the Romans remove the body?

The Romans had no reason or motive to remove the body of Jesus. - why should they? They had nothing to gain. They had no interest in Jesus. And it was Pontius Pilate who ordered that a guard be put on the tomb. There is nothing to suggest why the Romans should want to remove the body of Jesus.

All the evidence points to the truth of the empty tomb. The only plausible conclusion that can be made is that he was not there. He had risen.

Evidence for the Resurrection

First, there's the **evidence of the Scriptures**. All the New Testament writers affirm the truth of the Resurrection. It is the culmination of all four Gospels. Luke begins the Acts of the Apostles with a resurrection appearance of Jesus. The truth of the resurrection is fundamental to all of Paul's writings. Paul even describes himself as the last of the apostles to see the resurrected Jesus (in the story of his conversion). And our resurrected Lord wasn't just seen by one or two people, or even just his closest followers. The disciples were together in the upper room when Jesus came to them on two occasions (Thomas present just the second time). St. Paul tells us that he appeared to 500 people at one time (1 Cor 15). The resurrection is well documented as an historic fact.

Then there is a **different kind of evidence** – the evidence of changed lives, or the evidence of history. Beginning with Mary, John and Peter on that first Easter Sunday, right up to believers in our own day and age, countless millions of people can testify to their lives being transformed by coming to faith in the resurrected Jesus Christ. The Christian faith is based upon the truth of a living Saviour, not just a crucified hero.

As St Paul writes:

“And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.” (1 Corinthians 15:14).

He goes on to say:

‘If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.’ (1 Corinthians 15:19)

Throughout history, the truth of the resurrection has turned people’s lives upside-down. Beginning with the disciples, who were transformed from a ragbag of frightened, dejected men, to men with a message - who set the world on fire with faith in God, right through to our present age, in which we still see faith in Jesus and His resurrection changing people - changing hearts, changing lives.

Hymn writer Fanny Crosby says:

“The vilest offended who truly believes, that moment from Jesus a pardon receives.”

There can be no doubt that the resurrection of Jesus really did happen, and like Thomas and all of the others, we are challenged not just to believe the facts, but to kneel at the feet of Jesus, and invite him to be Lord of our hearts and lives. And if we do that, if we accept Jesus as our Lord and Master, then who knows what we can achieve? We too can set the world on fire with faith. Jesus’ love is the same now, just as it always has been. He calls us to worship him, and to live for him.

Let us pray.

Lord Jesus, I am so thankful that you came to live on earth. I believe that you died on the cross for my sake. I believe that you rose again from the grave and are still alive today. Come and live in my heart and make me the person whom you want me to be. Amen.