



Easter Sermon 2010

Luke 23.55-24.12

Today we celebrate that JESUS IS ALIVE, in spite of his cruel execution on the cross on Good Friday.

But *is* he alive? And does it really *matter* whether he is or not?

Isn't it a great weakness of the Church that we insist on singing about and reading about and re-enacting this fantastic story week by week and most especially on Easter day? Because in doing so we make it *very difficult* for all kinds of people to join in with us and experience and promote all the good things about the Christian life...

- We make it difficult for scientists, who know for a fact that it is impossible for a dead human being to come back to life after execution in the way the Bible describes of Jesus.
- We exclude people of other faiths, even though they *believe* in God. Muslims and Jews, for instance, who accept Jesus as a great rabbi or prophet, a messenger from God even, but can't accept this tale of the resurrection, and are offended by it.
- We exclude people who don't believe in God. People who can perhaps accept that Jesus was a fine moral teacher and a great example of compassionate and unselfish living, but can't accept things like miracles, and especially not *this* miracle.

Perhaps if we didn't insist on believing something scientifically impossible and incompatible with other faiths, if we accepted that Jesus is dead, like all the other great religious leaders from history, we'd find it easier to fill our Churches and work *together* with all people of goodwill for the peace and prosperity of the human race.

Wouldn't there be a great deal less misunderstanding and conflict in human society if we just stuck to what we have in common with other people, instead of constantly *drawing attention to what makes us different* from them: our belief in the unbelievable; our proclamation of the absurd?



WAIT A MINUTE!

Possibly ... but, before we cut the offending chunks out of our Bibles and pack our Communion silver away for good, perhaps we should reconsider once more the testimony of the earliest Christian believers.

- You see, the first Christians were so insistent that Jesus *had* been brought back to life, (and to a powerful, transformed life, not just a bedraggled, half dead resuscitation), that it was clearly of CENTRAL importance to their faith and to their lives, from the moment that they believed.
- The resurrection stories are the *climax* of all four Gospels, not just a sub-plot. Yes, some of the details differ - was there one angel or two? Did Mary Magdalene go to the tomb alone or did she have the other Mary and Joanna with her? Did Peter go to the tomb straight after the women or not, and was he on his own or did he have John with him? These differences only add to the authenticity - like when reporters give different descriptions of a great race or football match - it proves they *were* there and didn't just copy someone else's report.
- The Resurrection of Jesus is also the most prominent and emphatic teaching of the rest of the New Testament: Jesus *is* alive. Jesus *was* raised from the dead on that first Easter Sunday. This is what the writers insist.

THE QUESTION IS, can we rely on the testimony of these first believers? Couldn't it all be a trick or a mistake; an understandable case of wishful thinking by a fairly gullible bunch of people?

- This seems unlikely when we look at the evidence. The disciples - male and female - actually present themselves as quite thorough, responsible and sceptical about the resurrection of Jesus. This wasn't a group of people who were ready to clutch at the slightest straw that he might be alive.
- The women didn't go along to the tomb on the first Easter morning carrying chocolate eggs and party poppers, they carried *funeral spices*, which it had been too late for them to put on the dead body of Jesus on Good Friday. Then when they arrived at the empty tomb they were "utterly at a loss" as to what had happened (24.4) and "terrified" (24.5) by the explanation they heard. Even though these women had travelled with Jesus from Galilee, witnessing his



- works, hearing his words, they certainly didn't expect this turn of events and were absolutely stunned by it.
- The male disciples stayed at home early on the first Easter. Sensible chaps! They were less brave than the women and even more sceptical. When they heard the women, we are told, "the story appeared to them to be nonsense, and they would not believe them" (24.11). Later they did believe and recorded that they had various meetings with the living Lord Jesus.
- In the case of the women, we see a progression from their initial shock and fear, through a remembering of things Jesus had said would happen, to a telling of the good news to others. With the men we see exactly the same process happening, a little more slowly but just as emphatically. Why would these witnesses draw our attention to the fact that they didn't "get it" to begin with, unless this were true?
- Another possibility is that the early Christians were religious fraudsters and charlatans, making up the story of the resurrection to draw attention to themselves and make their fortune?
- Except that this isn't what happened. For the rest of their lives, most of the earliest Christians were happy to experience hostility, prejudice and social exclusion. Many were arrested and tortured and killed. Those who faced death invariably did so cheerfully, not because they hoped that cathedrals and basilicas might be named after them, but because they *knew for sure* that Jesus had defeated death, the oldest enemy, for them and that there was no longer anything to fear, in this world or the next, if they put their trust in him. This is a powerful testimony, because if they were making up their stories, surely they would recant, rather than lose their lives...

Conclusions

My conclusion has to be that Jesus IS alive and that it DOES MATTER. It mattered to the first Christians and it matters to us because it means that human life is not futile or hopeless. My testimony, and the testimony of millions who have believed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ before me, is that when you put your faith in him, he lives inside you and that you are *never* abandoned.

In a world which looks down every conceivable dead end to try and find happiness, peace, satisfaction and hope, I ask the question that God asked the women at the



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tomb; **"why search among the dead for one who is alive?"** Today we remember his words and deeds and we celebrate his risen life.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

He is risen indeed. Alleluia!