

# An Easter Study on the Resurrection

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Over the last couple of years our relatively pleasant Western life has become more unsettling. Disease and now the threat of war have all but destroyed our illusion of peace and security.



**As Christians around the world celebrate the resurrection this morning what relevance does this have to the war in Ukraine?**



Our NHS vaccination programme is now holding off the worst ravages of the latest strain of Covid, so that what was deadly a year ago has become little more than an inconvenience to us as we go about the business of returning to the

‘new normal’. Even so, we do this with a heavy heart as we cast sorrowful backward glances towards all those friends and relatives who did not survive to see this troubled day in which we find ourselves now but were left behind in the early scramble to fight off coronavirus and find a way through the pandemic. We cannot forget *them*, nor will we.

### **Hopes dashed!**

Yet, just as we were cautiously beginning to raise our expectations, in hopes of a return to near normal routine, and to the feelings of security that accompany this; and while concern for the Environment had begun to resurface as the more dangerous threat to our long term wellbeing than the now diminishing menace of Covid, just then, after long months of troop deployments, political posturing, false assurances and propaganda, all of which we perhaps failed to take seriously, Russia marched into Ukraine.



Now, only just over seven weeks later, the world looks on anxiously as the EU and NATO steadily increase their efforts to send humanitarian and military aid to support the courageous and inspirational defence of their territory by the Ukrainian people. Meanwhile, ever tightening economic sanctions are announced almost daily against the Russian aggressor who, aware that progress on the battlefield is being deliberately impeded by NATO, is openly declaring on its state television that World War Three has already begun!

**What has Easter and the resurrection message to do with all of this?**

Well, it is firstly important to say that the resurrection is not just for Easter. One of the misleading elements in our practice of the idea of the Christian Year is its tendency to concentrate the message of the resurrection to a season: to a particular week, and even to a special day. We do not do this exclusively of course, for if it were the case that we could so confine it then it would have precisely no significance for life at all.

**And what is the message of the resurrection?**

It is the core of the Gospel says the Apostle Paul *‘that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve. After that He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater*

*part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep. After that He was seen by James, then by all the apostles. Then last of all he was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time.’ (1 Corinthians 15:3 - 8).*

**The Bible doesn't prove the resurrection.**

No, of course not. The apostles don't spend time in their writings trying to prove the resurrection, they naturally assume it because they witnessed it for themselves. They are therefore much more interested in its implication for their lives. To them it is a fact.

Many today, even in the Church, have difficulties with the idea of a physical resurrection. There is much that we could say about this but suffice for now to point out that even if it were to be proved that there is no integrity at all to the New Testament Scriptures, that is, if the apostles were judged not to be true witnesses to the resurrection and were instead considered blatant liars; or as HG Wells famously claimed 'had simply invented the resurrection in order to give the gospel story a happy ending', then we would still have to explain how it was that pathologically monotheistic Jews arrived at a position of worshipping a dead carpenter!

More than this, how could it be that first century Palestinian Jews came to venerate as their Messiah a criminal who had been hung upon a cross? A fate

their religion described as being under a curse from God. (Deuteronomy 21:22, 23)



Wasn't the Messiah supposed to usher in a new age of universal peace and prosperity for Israel? Jesus of Nazareth had not done this. Instead, he had caused strife and dissension and brought the unwelcome attentions of the Roman occupiers down upon the heads of the nation. Besides, wouldn't he need to be alive to be the Coming One? But he had been executed for blasphemy and sedition.

### **The Apostle Paul**

These were the arguments of a young rabbi and pharisee named Saul of Tarsus. He concluded that the early Nazarene movement which sprung up following Jesus' reported resurrection was dangerous to the religion of Israel and to its temple. It represented a threat to all that he and Israel held dear, and so he opposed it violently,

seeking to ensure that its followers in Palestine and beyond were hunted down and, in many cases, put to death.



How was it then that such a man came to write so significantly large a part of the New Testament? How did he become a chief spokesman for those he had originally hounded mercilessly to their graves? The answer is a supernatural incident which he experienced on route to carry out more of the work of harassing and persecuting these Nazarenes. Saul met with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus!

A power from beyond the natural order broke into his life, and reality changed for him from that moment onwards, just as it had done for the women who encountered Christ at the tomb and for the disciples to whom He later appeared in the upper room.



### **A supernatural encounter!**

This is the only wholly satisfactory explanation for the dynamism of the Early Church movement. Mark's Gospel records that *'they went out and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them and confirming the word through the accompanying signs.'* (Mark 16:20)

A supernatural power was at work in and through the disciples, energising and accompanying them. This power was Christ Himself.



**But what of the problem of the Law and the nature of Jesus' death?**

Was the old argument invalid, that Jesus by being hanged on a tree had incurred the divine curse? That could surely not have changed since the Scriptures could not be broken (John 10:35) - Jesus' own words and the belief of every pious Jew! But this was not all that was at work here. It took Saul of Tarsus with all his great learning to figure this out, and he later wrote of his conclusions in his letters, by then calling himself by his Greek name of Paul.



The curse remained, he reasoned, but by being raised from death Jesus was very obviously also the object of divine approval. So how could these two contradictory truths stand together? The answer, Paul wrote, was that *'Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us...'* (Galatians 3:13) Paul was the first to see that the Messiah himself had assumed the curse denounced upon all breakers of God's law in order to liberate them from that curse. And this of course accorded with the Scriptures: *'The chastisement for our peace was upon Him....and the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.'*

(Isaiah 53: 5,6)

These were the only conclusions that Paul could come to, having met the risen Christ, and they were now the only reality that the apostles and followers of Jesus knew. They now became driven men and women! Their world view had shifted, and nothing could ever be the same again once they had encountered the Son of God in resurrected form.



God, it seemed, had simply overturned humanity's guilty verdict on Jesus and reversed the death sentence, raising Him from death. And the Church from its outset has been a direct product of this cataclysmic event: of the breaking in on the natural order of a power from beyond it: the power of the risen Christ. The Church therefore is a witness to the supernatural. Those who saw Him met with One who had come back from the dead! They were turned from frightened and defeated followers of a dead carpenter into fearless

proclaimers of a truth that they were now unable to deny.

### **The life of faith.**

Ever since, the Gospel has been a call to a supernatural life. To try to take the supernatural out of the Christian faith, to make it more acceptable to thinking people, is to strip it of all its power. Whatever else we might be trying to attract people to by so doing, it won't be the risen Christ that we will be offering but a powerless imitation.

### **The search for truth.**

We all have asked from time-to-time what purpose there is to our existence. Why are we here? What meaning is there to life, beyond survival and the pursuit of happiness? And, if happiness be robbed of us, and even life itself be placed in jeopardy, what are we to do? Is stoic indifference our only recourse? The Gospel says an emphatic 'No' to that philosophy! The resurrection is integral to the Gospel message for without it there is no Gospel. *'If Christ is not raised' wrote Paul, 'your faith is futile; you are still in your sins!'* (1 Corinthians 15:)

The Gospel is a breaking in of a power from beyond the natural order, it is an act of God Almighty, an intervention for our sakes aimed at restoring us to a place of friendship and fellowship with the One whom many people cannot even bring themselves to hope exists. *'If in this life*

*only*, wrote Paul, *'we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most pitiable.'*  
(1 Corinthians 15:19)

This power from God, this reality check, and life changing paradigm shift, comes to us when we open our hearts to Him and exercise the faith which He stands always ready to give to any one of us: *'For by grace you have been saved through faith and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.'* (Ephesians 2:8,9)

This explains why great intellectuals are ranked among both believers and unbelievers. The power of God to change a life comes not from an intellectual grasp of religious information, though this forms a part of some people's journey towards faith, it comes rather from an encounter with the risen Christ. And what else does faith as a gift from God mean if not a gracious revelation that He exists, and a supernatural encounter with His Son, the risen Christ? After this there is no going back for the man or woman who has been so awakened.

**Why is this so important at this time, and indeed at any time, in world history?**

Because there is no more important event in the history of humanity than the entrance into it of Almighty God in human form. God's Gospel is an act and a power working on our behalf, and is related to the perpetual conflict between good and evil, light and darkness; yes, even between

God and demons! God's Gospel is the breakthrough of the eternal order into this world of suffering and death. It is much more than the restoration to life of a good man; it is the vindication of divine righteousness and the declaration that the heart of the universe is spiritual. It is the kingdom of God made visible.<sup>1</sup>

What else can give courage to those facing death but certain knowledge of the life that lies beyond it? What gives us the mettle to oppose our oppressors if not the settled conviction that good must triumph in the end? So, we continue to pray that those in authority will have the courage to stand up to the aggressors, and that we too will hold our ground.

And that for those for whom material assistance, when it finally comes, will be too late, and for whom death is likely inevitable in this war, we pray that the power of the risen Christ will visit them and comfort them with the certain knowledge of their final state - a condition more wonderful than we could ever imagine: a place beyond our physical experience but not beyond our spiritual comprehension, when He gives us faith to reach for it, in response to our open-hearted plea. This is the message of the resurrection. This is why it is life changing and so relevant to all that we

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<sup>1</sup> Warrack Lectures on Preaching, 'Heralds of God'. Professor J S Stewart. Teach Yourself Preaching, The Teach Yourself Series, 1955.

are living through right now, as the bombs rain down on Kiev and the Covid rates rise here once again.

**Alleluia! Christ is risen!**  
**He is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

