

1 Corinthians 15:1-11
Matthew 28:1-10

Jesus is risen

ForeWord

Over the last month or so, I've been pushing a little on the question of relevance – what “relevance” means – and this in connection with the miracles in the biblical stories, of which we might consider the Easter Resurrection the greatest. Where is the miracle, the word, which relieves?

When it comes to talk of miracles, and not least the Resurrection, the question which arises in any sensible person's mind almost straightaway will be something like, “Did it really happen? “ Yet, however hard we might think it is to answer this question satisfactorily, it is at least as hard, actually, to ask it properly, honestly.

Consider this: if you were a sceptic – and perhaps you still are – who somehow came to be convinced of the “fact” that Jesus rose from the dead, what difference would it make to you? I suspect that it would probably not make much difference at all.

And the reason is, to put it rather bluntly, that we are much less interested in the facts than we think we are. Consider the following “facts”. It is established pretty much incontrovertibly that smoking is very bad for you, that drinking to excess is very bad for you, that narcotics and prescription drug addictions are very bad for you, that sexual promiscuity exposes you to all sorts of health risks, that driving too fast gets people killed, that too much salt, fat and sugar wreaks havoc with our health, that “the house always wins”, that predators of children get caught, that philanderers are exposed, that if we kill our enemies their children will want to kill us, that if we don't do it now it will cost more later, that unrestrained consumption cannot be sustained, that we are running out of oil, and that we are facing significant and possibly even catastrophic climate change. Among other things.

And yet, such things being as well established as they can be, we *continue* to smoke, drink, treat our bodies as garbage disposers, gamble, speed, betray, kill, procrastinate, consume and burn as if what we know about these things, in fact, is *not* the case. What we know as a “fact” doesn't necessarily, or even often, make a lot of difference to how we act. Rather, we live “wishfully” – blindly – as if it won't happen to us, or maybe only *wanting* it not to happen to us, *imagining* that our wish will change the order of things, if deep down we would admit all the while that it certainly won't.

My intention here is not to moralise on human stupidity but simply to illustrate that it's no easy thing to ask an honest question about the proclaimed resurrection of Jesus, or about any resurrection we ourselves might enjoy. If irrefutable data on the effects of smoking or eating rubbish or procrastinating or killing our enemies don't convince us to change our behaviour, then do we really imagine that a “proof” of the resurrection of Jesus is something even worth pursuing? What difference do we imagine it would make?

Strangely, then, though it seems the obvious thing to wonder about, the mere *fact* that something like the resurrection might have happened is likely to be neither here nor there for people like us who don't take facts all that seriously. We are less logical and

rational than we might imagine, which matters when logic and rationality are the reasons usually given for dismissing the resurrection.

Or, perhaps more accurately, we are very often *thoroughly* rational, according to the way of thinking which most has us in its grip. The question is, what kind of thinking is it which pretends to trust science and logic to tell us most about ourselves or the world, and yet ignores the results of that research and continues in destructive behaviours? Our willingness to live dangerously in spite of what we know suggests that ours is, in fact, fundamentally a death-denying world-view. But if in this way we do deny death's approach by risking or wasting our lives and resources, then it should scarcely surprise us that we are not interested in serious talk of resurrection. We live as if we don't *need* resurrection, for death itself no longer concerns us. We've not felt the anxiety at which talk of the resurrection is directed, or the anxiety which it ought to produce. And this is also to say that the more common "No" answer doesn't really mean anything either, if we aren't *able* to take seriously a "Yes" answer on the Resurrection.

I've picked up a scriptural text today which is actually from next year's Easter Day readings, from St Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. Here, Paul is at pains to assure the Corinthian church of the Resurrection, and appeals to the testimony he has heard in the tradition and also to his own later encounter with the risen Jesus, which he measures as of the same reality as those encounters of the original disciples. But I'm interested today in the *reason* Paul gives for outlining this: "so that you don't believe in vain" (v. 2), he says, to which we'll return after hearing the passage...

Word: The Testimony of Scripture

(→ [1 Corinthians 15. 1-11](#))

Word: Proclamation

Paul speaks of "...[the gospel] through which you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you – *unless you have come to believe in vain*" (NRSV). One scholar (Anthony Thistelton) has put to this little line a sense which is especially useful for the task of thinking about *thinking about* the resurrection of Jesus: "...unless you believed *without coherent consideration*". Coherent consideration is *not* the kind of process we've just described: wanting to establish the facts without any intention to do anything about them. This is *incoherent* consideration.

But, as we've already suggested, the incoherence is not only the failure to take the idea of resurrection seriously; it's the failure to take death seriously. We are basically death-deniers. Despite the established facts relating to what we do, we live our lives in such a way as to imply that death isn't really there. (This was part of the problem Paul wanted to address at Corinth). We don't really think that our abuse of our bodies by way of what we put in them will make a difference in the end, else we'd act differently; we don't really think that our consumption of resources will make a difference to us or the environment in the end; we don't really think that the impact of our lifestyle upon others in our society or on the other side of the world matters that much. If we did think that such deathly things mattered, we'd stop, or at least try to change direction, or at the very least confess that we are stuck and can't really do anything to change ourselves or the lot of others. This would be honest, and would open up the question about whether there might be something important in resurrection-talk which would meet precisely our daily experience of death in all its little manifestations.

We [remarked on Good Friday](#) that the cross and Easter Day are not Question and Answer, but are two forms of the same thing: the triumph of life over death. This triumph is as much on Good Friday's cross as in Easter's Resurrection. To believe in the resurrection as a contradiction of death, then, is also to believe in the cross as also a

contradiction of death – a contradiction of death’s power to determine us. To believe in the Resurrection of Jesus is to believe in the cross, is to commit to a life which refuses death any continuing dominion.

This is why it’s hard to ask a serious question about the Resurrection: because if the answer were Yes, it would require us to change, and to take seriously the death around us and to which we are subject and committed.

If talk of Jesus’ resurrection were to be anything that is truly *interesting* – truly worth saying Yes or No to, then our question about whether or not it “actually” happened would really be neither here nor there, or at least not the place where we must begin. In our approach to the question about the resurrection of Jesus – if we are to be honest – perhaps we should start with ourselves. We should ask not “Did it happen?“, as if the answer would actually make a difference. Rather, we should ask: do we not *need* the Resurrection of Jesus to happen? Do we not *need* such a thing to expose the truth about ourselves and the way we live – in the presence of death and yet denying it? Do we not *need* a call to a life which is not simply a covering-over of our impending death but an incomprehensible shattering of that death and the insidious hold it has on us, even as we refuse to acknowledge it? Do we not need to be prompted into “coherent consideration” and sensible thought about what it means truly to be human – honest, alive and free?

I confess that *I* do, at least, because most of the time I live as if life doesn’t really matter, which is to say: that it is not much different from the death I do not acknowledge either. Resurrection faith is hard not because I find it hard to believe that a dead man could stop being dead but because I find it hard to believe – perhaps even really to *want* to believe – that I am already dead and so in need of raising. Because when we “add” the cross to the Resurrection, we discover just this: that we deny death because we are subject to it, and so are in need of resurrection.

And so, for the sake of making sense of the life we live and the death we will die, we declare: Jesus *is* risen – to the glory of God and that we might truly be ourselves. And now the truly hard word of Easter is put. This hard word is not that we must believe in impossible things like resurrection, creation out of nothing and the release of captives, but that we must *become* impossible things like these. To confess the Resurrection of Jesus is to commit to becoming women and men who embody all this – who *live* the Resurrection and don’t merely “believe” it.

How do we do that? There is no “how”. That’s the point. It’s the miracle of life, which comes from nowhere. It is the Lord’s doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes (Ps 118).

Let us then let go, rejoice and become the good news: Jesus is Risen. Alleluia.
