

THE CHRISTIAN VISION OF LIFE AFTER DEATH

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The Resurrection of Jesus: The Stubborn Evidence

Introductory

Resume of the first talk: Setting the scene. The challenges to Christian belief today. The culture is not favourable to faith. The Church communicates poorly about the life of the world to come. But we are to give an account of the hope that is in us'. God's question to each of us: 'Where are you?' Belief is basic to human living. Belief in the life to come is our gift to an anxious and bewildered world. I invited you to reflect and chat – perhaps to set up a little Death Cafe! And since God is the main person involved, I suggested that prayer is helpful.

We now move to talk about the core of Christians belief, the Resurrection of Jesus.

The Stubborn Evidence

No topic has been so analysed by scholars, scientists, theologians and sceptics as the alleged Resurrection of Jesus. And this will always be the case.

What consensus is there about Jesus? That he existed: that he died about 30 AD, aged between 34 and 36 years of age. He had worked in public for some 2-3 years, spread the Good News of God's love for the world and gathered disciples. But he had run foul of the religious and political authorities, so he suffered under Pontius Pilate, died and was buried, as the early creeds tell us. He was buried by Joseph of Arimathea, not by the disciples, *because they had fled*. His dreadful and untimely death left them in total disarray.

Yet a short time later they emerged onto the public stage in Jerusalem, unanimously claiming, despite warnings from the authorities, that Jesus had been raised by God from the dead.

Why this change in them which was so radical that they donated their entire lives to his mission, even to flogging and death?

Was it The Empty Tomb?

It was the women who discovered that his tomb was empty – but women’s status as credible witnesses was then low; the male disciples went to look for themselves and found that what the women had said was impossibly true. The story spread by the authorities to explain the empty tomb fell flat – that the disciples stole the body. It would surely have been found if they had done so, but it was never found. But the empty tomb alone is not a proof of the Resurrection, nor did the disciples make very much of it.

The Transformation of the Disciples

We know that hope for the resurrection--of the just--was common in Jesus’ day, but it was simply a hope, an unsubstantiated belief; and it was thought to occur at the end of time, not in the middle of history. It was not thought of as of immediate relevance. Jesus had foretold both his death and his rising again, but the disciples had not understood.

No more than anyone else were they expecting what seemed to have happened. They locked themselves in the Upper Room, for fear of the Jews. Some decided to abandon the group and headed off for Emmaus. There was no conspiracy to pretend Jesus was alive: they were adrift, with no plan for anything. For want of better they went back fishing!

But they began to find themselves encountering the Risen One in all sorts of life-situations: in a garden; in the Supper-room; at the lakeside; on the Emmaus Road... How did this occur? We are advised by some theologians to avoid over-spiritualising the Appearances. There came a dawning awareness that as his human life ended the Father must have embraced Jesus and brought him into the fullness of God’s own life. A God-dunnit of the highest order! The Father had

saved him, not FROM death but IN his death, and since all that occurred in Jesus was FOR US, he would bring us with him. The Father vindicated the manner of his Son's life and death – purest love, forgiveness, accepting of the worst that could be done to him, and still loving and inviting us into his own new life.

Transformed by these encounters, they didn't spend their time clustered around the empty tomb, wondering what to do next. Instead they began to tell of his appearing to them, with a message of peace, joy, hope, mission, forgiveness of sin. They experienced themselves compelled to share this Good News with anyone who would listen. Miracles occur when they cure in his name (Acts). Their preaching breaks open the hearts of many. They go back over Jesus' life and begin to catch on to who he really was and is, and so the Gospel memoirs begin to be written.

New and Ultimate Meaning!

They began to see in Jesus' resurrection the beginning of the fulfilment of the ultimate plan of God in creating the world: that God wishes to share infinite happiness with all humankind. 'I know the plans I have in mind for you... reserving for you a future full of hope.'

They saw that Jesus is now fully alive, and they experienced that life as infectious, available to anyone who wishes it. *'In him was life and that life was the light of humankind'*. They found themselves pulsing with this new life.

For them, the human story now has ultimate meaning; it is not 'a tale told by an idiot...'; it culminates not in emptiness but glorious fulfilment. The irruption of God into human lives means the beginning of a new era, the era of grace, the love of God intensely active in the world. A new dimension of creation is underway and they are to be the carriers of this Good News, this message of hope.

They had seen in the miracles and preaching of Jesus what God is truly like: healing, caring, merciful, compassionate, just what the fragile world needed. All this had seemed to have come to a sudden and tragic end, but because Jesus is now alive in a new way, God is unimaginably close, on their side, and they see

that it is THEY who are to carry his saving mission to the ends of the earth. Moreover, because of the unmeasurable love of God which floods the world, death becomes an in-between moment, a rite of passage into the fullness of life.

The New World Order

Yet more: in the accounts of the passion and resurrection of Jesus, the evangelists give hints that the old order of the world is changed. The Temple veil is torn from top to bottom, earthquakes occur; graves open and the dead appear; the great stone guarding the tomb entrance is rolled away, and the Risen One is both the same yet different, so that the disciples do not recognise him at first. A new dimension of reality is opening up; a new order of things, the era of the resurrection, has dawned.

The Resurrection is not an event among others in human history: it changes everything, gives a tired world new meaning. We find it hard to grapple with this idea, but think of a country taken over by another: from being citizens of Country X, everyone is now a citizen of Y. As the Roman Empire spread 2000 years ago people no longer belonged to their local tribes but became citizens of the Empire. Closer to home, Brexit leads to a whole new set of relationships, even for cows contentedly eating grass: they had been part of the EU, but after January 2021 they are instead part of the UK.

G M Hopkins catches in a dramatic image the radical change in humankind which is brought about by the Resurrection of Jesus: 'Enough! The Resurrection... I am all at once what Christ is, since he was what I am, and / This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, patch, matchwood, immortal diamond / Is immortal diamond.' The presence of the Resurrected Christ in the body of humankind radiates and begins to transfigure all of us as sisters and brothers of Jesus.

Christian Experience of meeting the risen One

Those who took seriously the witness of the disciples about Jesus rising from the dead and his presence in the world begin to live out of that belief. The personal experience of encountering the risen One transforms them. We see the fruits in Christian history.

For example: it was enviously said of the Early Christians: ‘See how they love one another!’ Saul the persecutor becomes the great missionary to the gentiles; So with Francis of Assisi, so with Ignatius reading the Gospels on his sick bed, so with Nano Nagle and Mother Teresa. They flood the world with a love and a vision that is more than human: it comes ultimately from God. The Resurrection makes its mark on the world by being lived out. It’s not a static historical event in the past but dynamically operative in the present.

Our Experience?

And for ourselves? Many good Christians feel deeply disconnected from the Resurrection. The enlivening original experience of the disciples seems lost to us, 2000 years on. The explosive energy and buzz of the early Church has long since waned and institutional living has taken over. The Charismatic Renewal brought a brief flare of energy after Vatican Two, but it too has largely died down. Recent scandals weigh heavily on ‘the faithful’ who have tenaciously survived. But as Karl Rahner said some 40 years ago, the Christian of the future will be a mystic or not be there at all. So let’s put on our mystic spectacles and look deeper into what is really going on, draw life from it, and blow the smouldering ashes into flame again.

Where Does Jesus Come In?

Where shall we place the enlivening moment of the Resurrection? Let’s explore first the presence of Jesus within the whole evolutionary process from the beginning. Think of the evolution of the world as a lengthy preparation for what was to be revealed 2000 years ago. Over the billions of years since the Big Bang there goes on a maturing of the potential hidden from the beginning. ‘Things hidden since the foundation of the world’ is a term Jesus uses: he could be referring it to himself (Matthew 13:35). He himself is the central reality, and in the fullness of time he emerges (Gal 4:4). Think of the daffodil hidden in the earth eventually emerging when the conditions are right. God then does not come to us from outside but from within, as Pope Francis emphasises in *Laudato Sí* (236). He emerges as ‘one of us’ and we share a common genealogy, of which

Matthew and Luke make so much. He is not an extra-terrestrial, an alien, a rescuer parachuted down to earth for the heavens.

Theologians have coined the term 'deep incarnation' to catch this truth. They want us to be aware that with the presence of the divine in our world from the beginning, our reality is already elevated. The Resurrection is anticipated from the beginning. Incarnation and resurrection are two aspects of the enlivening of our world. All humankind, and creation too--since in Rahner's term we are 'children of the earth--are touched with divinity.

The Resurrection is at hand

So the Resurrection is close to us and active whether we know it or not. It is active in us at the deepest level. But as Christians we need to get over the error of locating the Resurrection at an impossible distance of 2000 years behind us or before us in what we think of as the General Resurrection at the close of history. We need theological 'mindfulness' to live in a present in which we see the Risen One already influencing everything because he is touching every event of our lives, to bring them to life. This gives us heart and the sense that the world is in fact not largely empty of God but pulsing with divine life. The liturgical year is a celebration of all this, in Advent, Easter and every Eucharist. Our cold world is already being thawed by the warming beams of the Resurrection, and we can warm ourselves in its rays. What we are talking about is already 'hidden in plain sight' so let us contemplate it with joy!

Personal Encounter

Given that we encounter the Risen One already in the dynamic of human existence, even if largely without knowing it, we can now explore how we can meet the Risen One intimately and personally whenever we choose.

I invite you to reflect back to a moment in your life when the future seemed dull and perhaps pointless: then out of the blue someone breaks in on it and gives it new and rich – this is the stuff of love-stories. Your life is reconfigured around this person and takes off in a new and vibrant direction; you want to be close to this other person; you draw life from them.

Love stories hint at the Christian story which is 'the greatest story ever told'. We can encounter the living Jesus whose friendship brings about a reconfiguring of your perhaps dull and ordinary life and helps it to take off in a new and vibrant direction. Hopkins helps us again here: 'I greet him the days I meet him, and bless when I understand'. Christians are already mystics in Rahner's understanding of the term: they experience the reality of God in their lives, they become aware of being limitlessly loved, of being 'smiled on'.

Such personal transformative encounters can take place all the time. When you pray reflectively, ponder the gospels, attend the Eucharist, say the Rosary, do the Stations or other devotions, you come away somewhat changed – kinder, more compassionate, more trusting, more humble, more forgiving, less fearful, less self-preoccupied, aware of being loved limitlessly, more loving, more patient in accepting suffering, happier. You could take this for granted and notice it no more than noticing yourself gently ageing. But what has been going on is that you have been encountering someone who is enlivening you, and this is quietly transforming. When you notice this, prayer moves from dull routine to life-giving meetings with the Risen One, and their effects are visible by reflection. We are indeed children of this earth, but also children of the Resurrection.

Good Infection

CS Lewis talks about the importance of 'good infection' to illustrate how we can come to live out of the Resurrection. As a schoolboy, he says, if he wanted to get off school he knew that an attack of mumps would do the trick. So he got close to the boy in class who had just had them. He concludes that if you want to be more alive and joyous, you need to engage in close encounter with the one who is life itself and sheer joy.

This is why Pope Francis in his *Joy of the Gospel* invites everyone 'to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them. I ask all of you to do this unfailingly every day. No one should think that this encounter is not for him or her... he is already there, waiting for us with open arms' (3).

When you give time to meeting the risen One you begin to radiate with the light of the Resurrection. The 'Resurrection' is not simply an event; it is a Person! You come to see the world as he does, and to love as he loves. Your values become divine ones, which are outward bound, leading you to live justly and lovingly, to serve others, perhaps to educate and heal, to stand for justice, to fight all forms of domination; to protect the planet and to promote human dignity for all.... The story of Christianity at its best is an extraordinary witness to the altruistic love born from encounter with the Resurrected One. Since the life of the world to come has already dawned it is already evident in others, and you can be sustained by them.

You become 'the Good News in the present tense', the stubborn daily evidence that Jesus is truly resurrected and active in the world.

In the next Talk we will explore the Christian vision of life after death as a Joyous Homecoming.