

## The resurrection of Jesus

### Luke 24:1-12

I am a fortunate man. I have known and walked with Jesus for most of my life. I don't have a "before and after" testimony like some here do. Nevertheless, there have been times in my life when I have felt the world crashing in around me.

I don't mean the despair when my team loses or when Alison declined my invitation to go out with her when I was 15.

I mean the times when my business was in danger of going under as a result of a mistake I had made and I sat in my lounge at home in London and sobbed as I thought of the livelihoods about to be lost and the humiliation for me and my family.

I mean the times when close family members have suffered and died far too young.

In this account, Luke 24:1-12, you have to remember that the women and disciples in Jesus' entourage were experiencing the world crashing in on them. They were in a bad way. They were suffering from severe post-traumatic stress.

Their hero and Lord had been brutally murdered. Their hopes of a new life for their people, liberated from the oppression of the Romans, dashed. Their three years on the road, wasted. What was it all about? What did it all mean? Why? Why? Why?

If you are a follower of Jesus and are full of "why" questions, or "how" questions (how do I break through those obstacles, struggles, in my life?), there is in this message an opportunity to receive a fresh anointing of power to live a redeemed life.

If you are not a follower of Jesus, there is in this message a reason and an occasion to grasp the opportunity of inviting Him to be your Lord and Saviour too.

### Luke 24:1-12

*On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. 2 They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, 3 but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. 4 While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them.*

*5 In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, 'Why do you look for the living among the dead? 6 He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: 7 "The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified and on the third day be raised again."' 8 Then they remembered his words.*

*9 When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others. 10 It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles. 11 But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense. 12 Peter, however, got up and ran to the tomb.*

*Bending over, he saw the strips of linen lying by themselves, and he went away, wondering to himself what had happened.*

In verse 1 the disciples stayed in their bunker, depressed and confused whilst the women went to the tomb distraught and grieving. They dwelt in their misery and walked in a cemetery. Miserable. Their focus was a grave. Dead bodies and skeletons. Decomposition and darkness.

Have you lived your life in that place? Are you living your life there now? Is your soul down-hearted, your expectations low, your field of vision just a cave?

Sometimes we look at the world and just long for a re-boot, a fresh start, for light in the darkness.

Think of the caterpillar, crawling along the branch munching leaves. Has he any awareness of life as a butterfly? Although there is an alternative life for a caterpillar, that is where they start. The butterfly state follows the caterpillar state.

It's a crazy idea but just imagine that you had loads of caterpillars in your garden and that they were failing to go through the metamorphosis to become butterflies. The power to do it wasn't there.

They lived, they munched, they died. And wrecked your garden.

You discover that the only way to set those caterpillars free is to become one yourself. And munch and die – but then you metamorphose into a butterfly and in so doing break the power of death for any caterpillar that chooses to believe!

It's a silly analogy but actually it is a picture of how God loves us so much that he became as one of us in Jesus, suffered the humiliation and trauma of crucifixion, died and was buried.

And then God raised Jesus from the dead in a cataclysmic show of strength to beat the power of death once and for all.

This miracle of our gospel message shows us that  
the God who made you  
and loves you  
chooses to become like you  
and to suffer death for you  
so that you can know eternal life, starting now.  
It's an amazing message.

### **Did it really happen?**

In verse 11 we're told that it seemed like nonsense to the disciples. What does it mean if it is just nonsense?

**1 Corinthians 15:14, 19,**

"If Christ has not been raised our preaching is useless and so is your faith ... If only for this life we have hope in Christ we are to be pitied more than all men."

If there is no life after death, if Jesus' resurrection didn't happen, if it was a sham, then this is as good as it gets and we are wasting our time and energy and money in following a God who can't or won't rescue us from the caterpillar state!

**But the real question is perhaps - is it a philosophical issue or an historical issue?**

Are you starting from the, "prove it to me" point or are you starting from the "miracles don't happen" point?

Is it about the facts of history or about the way you see the world?

Natalie Bennett, the leader of the UK's Green Party is an atheist and non-religious. She is highly committed to changing the world for better.

*"Basically, I just think that you've got a responsibility to attempt to leave the world a bit better than it was when you found it. And that's not laid down by a higher power or anything; it's just that if there's going to be a point to your existence, that's the point." (Third Way January 2016).*

I think she is on to something there but she hasn't followed through on the logic. She hits a philosophical wall – there isn't a God and therefore miracles don't happen.

On the other hand, she's right, we do all know, deep down, that things should be better, there's more to life than this.

What I would love to say to her, and to you if you are an atheist, is, "Wouldn't it be great if it were true? If we could see and believe in life after death, if we did have evidence of a power which defeats evil and sickness and injustice?"

Wouldn't an atheist, wouldn't Natalie, love to believe in the resurrection?

Wouldn't it be wonderful if we weren't just caterpillars and that the beauty of the butterfly was a gift waiting for us?

Wouldn't it be a liberation to think that we may step into the burial chamber (like the women in Luke) in misery and disappointment but step out in clothes that gleam like lightning?

But if you don't believe that miracles happen, that Jesus didn't rise from the dead, then I think the onus is on you to disprove the historical account of the resurrection. If you start from the premise it was impossible then you have to try and explain what happened.

And if, on investigation, you discover that it did happen then you have to re-think your world-view, and allow for there to be a God who loves you and intervenes in history to save you.

## The historical case

The books tell us that people saw Jesus alive,  
they saw him dead  
and they saw him alive again.

### 1. Did Jesus die?

Otherwise known as the swoon theory. I.e. that Jesus survived a brutal blood-letting beating at the hands of the Roman soldiers, survived carrying his cross up the hill, survived the executioner's crucifixion and the sword in the side; that, placed in a grave He recovered from a swoon in the cool of the tomb and managed to muscle his way out of the locked and guarded tomb, make his way unseen into the upper room where the disciples were moping and somehow convinced them that He was fit and well and ready to rock and roll. It's ridiculous. The Romans knew how to execute people.

### 2. Was the tomb empty?

Perhaps they went to the wrong tomb? Or perhaps they were talking about a spiritual resurrection not a bodily one? The trouble was that if the disciples claimed a resurrected body but couldn't produce one the Jewish authorities or the Romans would simply have jogged over to the tomb and pointed and said – there it is. Yes the tomb was empty and no body was ever produced to deny that.

### 3. Did he appear to anyone? Did anyone see him?

All the four gospels testify (in different ways, thus adding to their authenticity) that various women, particularly Mary, the disciples and others saw Jesus alive. Women's testimony was not considered trustworthy in those days and therefore it wouldn't have been fabricated.

Just a few years later St Paul writes to the church in Corinth and says, *"For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that **he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.**"* 1 Corinthians 15:3-9.

Another 500 people, plus Jesus' brother and Paul himself. That's a bit like posting a note on Facebook or Twitter or Instagram and tagging 500 people and then saying, "They all saw Jesus – check it out with them."

How much more evidence of Jesus having been seen do we need? Or do we just claim that there was an enormous conspiracy of silence. Seems far-fetched to me.

#### 4. How do we know the texts are true?

- Paul writes about 15 years after the event (1 Corinthians 15:3-9), he uses well attributed testimony and drags in hundreds of people who were still alive. The equivalent is if you were to surf YouTube for clips of 9/11 and remind people about what happened then.
- Mark writes about 15-20 years after that and is largely basing his account on the experience of Peter and earlier sources that were established and circulating in the region.
- Matthew, Luke and John all added their own versions of the story in the following decades. Luke also wrote a history of the church immediately after these events took place and describes people whose lives have been turned upside down by the claim that Jesus had risen from the dead (Acts).
- No one disputed the stories then – even though many alive. It would have been corrected if they were fabricated.

#### 5. What happened as a result?

I find that all pretty convincing. But even more convincing is observing the two things that happened to the people around Jesus.

Firstly, there was a peculiar and radical change in world view. In the thinking of the time, whether Jewish, Greek or Roman, resurrection from the dead did not figure. It wasn't an option, wasn't discussed, they had hardly any language for it. Any concept of life after death was relegated to a future apocalyptic end-of-the-world scenario.

This is evidenced by the way the disciples consistently misunderstand or ignore Jesus' repeated warnings about what was going to happen. So much so that when the women (untrustworthy as they were meant to be) came with the message of the empty tomb the disciples thought it was nonsense.

But within a very short period Peter was standing in front of thousands declaring that this Jesus, whom they had crucified, had risen from the dead. (Acts 2:23,24). The disciples had experienced a life-transforming, 180 degree turn in their world view. That doesn't happen to a group of people because they have read a good book or watched a meaningful documentary. That only happened because they had seen the risen Jesus, in the flesh, and found their minds and thinking transformed. It's a remarkable metamorphosis.

Secondly, something led a bunch of disillusioned, doubting, depressed disciples to march into the world in revolutionary fervour, bringing thousands to faith and going to a martyr's death themselves. 2000 years later 2 billion people own the risen Jesus as Lord. Did that all happen based on a forged and mystical simulation? It's hard to believe that it did!

Is this a 2000-year conspiracy? Is our faith a deception based on a façade? No. It is recorded because it happened.

The only convincing explanation is that a real, death-defeating, living, present and very powerful Lord Jesus encountered them and encounters us.

If you choose not to believe in the resurrection then, in effect, you are saying, *"I admit that my explanations are less plausible than yours but I can't believe in a God who intervenes in history and does miracles – so I'll have to live in denial."*

On the contrary, I believe that we are not abandoned to a pointless fate but, through an encounter with the conquering, risen Lord, we can be transformed by the power of His love.

## **Conclusion**

This means that this life isn't all there is. There is a better story in which death is defeated.

Wherever you are in your life, wherever you have been, Easter is about a Lord and Saviour who comes to us, pays the price, writes the cheque of forgiveness.

Our God of extraordinary grace, makes the costliest sacrifice, then demonstrates supernatural cosmic power to break the chains of death and destruction and set you free. He raises you up to a redeemed life today and a new creation for all of us one day.

The resurrection is the guarantee that there is a better future.

## **A challenge for you**

I wonder where you are:

Far from God?

In a dark and depressing place?

Struggling to live a strong and purposeful life as a Christian?

On a dusty road asking questions?

Today, if you will open your heart to Him He is waiting to come and fill you with His presence and power, bringing forgiveness and mercy and give you a new start, the invitation to live a resurrection life.

Putting your faith in Jesus brings eternal life but also a transformed life today.

Now is your opportunity to surrender unconditionally to his amazing love and receive forgiveness for the past and power for the future.

You can pray this prayer, or one like it,

*Lord Jesus, I am amazed at the story of Easter, that you would give up everything for me and then defeat the power of death to offer me forgiveness and new life. I am sorry for my cynicism and for making choices that take me away from you. I feel powerless to take control over my life. Please come into my life with your mercy and let me experience some of your resurrection power and love to heal and change me and make me new.*

David Flowers

27 March 2016