

“I Believe in the Resurrection”

<u>Occasion</u>	Easter Evening Service at Therfield Chapel
<u>Day, Date & Time</u>	Sunday 27 March 2005 at 18:30
<u>Basis</u>	The disciples’ disbelief; (Luke 24:1-11) Doubting Thomas; (John 20:24-29) Two on the Emmaus Road; (Luke 24:13-35) Breakfast with Jesus at the lakeside; (John 21:1-14) Paul’s references to the resurrection. (1 Corinthians 15)
<u>Readings</u>	Luke 24:1-11; 1 Corinthians 15:12-22
<u>Songs</u>	357, 220, 367, 52, 14, 295, 689 from Mission Praise ‘See what a morning’ by Stuart Townend & Keith Getty
<u>Author/Speaker</u>	Paul Rydon

I want to ask you a question.

Do you really believe the Easter story?

You see Christmas is fairly easy to believe.

The baby is sent from God,
and arrives as a displaced citizen in a manger in Bethlehem.

Even today,

most people including children know the story,
and because we can all relate to the sheer dependence of a baby
we take the story to heart
and believe it.

The big question of who this baby is,

is stated in a non-challenging environment
and we accept the baby Jesus at face value.

It is only in his later adult life

that we are really challenged as to who this baby,
now a man,
truly is.

But then we come to Good Friday

and here again the facts are presented as they happen.

We feel and endure the injustice.

We recoil at the suffering.
We understand, to some extent, the sacrifice
and we can readily accept that he died for us.

But when we come to Easter Day,

we are asked to believe the unbelievable.

The experiences of the women who went early to the tomb,

the reactions of the disciples at the news,
the blindness (lack of perception) of the two on the Emmaus Road,
and ‘doubting’ Thomas’s unbelief,
all challenge us as to whether we too will believe this story.

The Bible records a number of resurrections in addition to that of Jesus:

The son of the widow of Zarephath, by Elijah, (1 Kings 17:22) ;
The son of the Shunammite woman, by Elisha, (2 Kings 4:35) ;
A dead man was restored to life at the touch of Elisha's bones, (2 Kings 13:21) ;
Jairus's daughter, by Jesus, (Matthew 9:25) ;
The son of the widow of Nain, by Jesus, (Luke 7:15) ;
Lazarus of Bethany, by Jesus, (John 11:44) ;
Saints at the time of the crucifixion, (Matthew 27:52; Mark 5:42) ;
Dorcas, by Peter, (Acts 9:40) .

To my knowledge,
the Bible is the only book to present such incidents as factual history.
They are not myths,
they are not poems,
they are not fiction,
nor prophecy.
They are presented as true.

And so it is with the resurrection of Jesus.
But as we read the story,
we find disbelief;
we find doubt
and a refusal to believe without evidence.

We find surprise,
and incredulity,
and amazement,
and then wonder,
and delight
and belief.

And we are forced to ask ourselves the question,
"Do I believe this story?"
If I had been there,
would I have been convinced enough to believe it?
And I wonder why the Bible challenges us in this way.

I think that it challenges us in this way because they were challenged at the time
and the writers simply recorded the progress from disbelief
to belief.

But the other reason, I think, why the Bible records this
is the centrality of the resurrection to the Christian position.

Now I need to remind you that we are Christians because it is true.
If I did not believe it were true,
I would not be here tonight.

We do not subscribe to the view that faith "means blind trust,
in the absence of evidence,
even in the teeth of evidence".
Faith is the ability to trust what we have reason to believe is true.

We could spend this evening giving the case for the historical facts of the resurrection.
Maybe we should some time.

A few years ago, Paul Zanreps did just that from this very pulpit.
But there are good books which do it better than I,
my favourite is 'Who moved the Stone, by Frank Morrison'.
(See my book review of this date)
But that is not where I want to go this evening.

This evening I want to have a look for a moment
at what Paul is saying in 1 Corinthians 15

Paul is actually contending with those who say that there is no resurrection.
That this life is all there is.
A common position for the secular humanist of our day.
This quote from Bertrand Russell says it all:

*"There is darkness without and when I die there will be darkness within. There is no splendour,
no vastness anywhere, only triviality for a moment, then nothing."*

Have you ever thought this position through? –
We are born,

we grow through childhood,
through adolescence
and on to be men and women.
We grow old, and die.
What then?
Nothing?

In this life, we are loved and learn to love.
We may be hated and may learn to hate.
We work, we play and we rest.

We experience joy,
we have fun,
and we suffer sorrow and grief.
We learn and we teach.
We grow in families and make new ones of our own,
passing on the baton of life to the next generation
like a never-ending relay race.
For what?
For nothing?

Such futility can,
and for many does,
lead to despair
and even suicide.
But the message of Christ is so different.

He paints a picture of life that leads to reconciliation with his heavenly Father,
and clearly states that his death and resurrection
are the route to that restoration
and to a relationship that will last
not only through this life,
but into the next and for evermore.

In Christianity, life is presented as going somewhere.
History has a purpose.

God created man for his own pleasure.
Adam falls and man and woman succumb to sin and reject their creator.

God takes control,
and through all the vagaries of the history of mankind,
sends his Son as Saviour of the world.

That Son arrives as a baby,
grows into manhood and ministry,
but is not accepted.

His rejection by the very people he came to save,
creates the conditions for the greatest sacrifice of all
when Jesus suffers and dies to pay the price of sin -
yours and mine -
making it possible for God to forgive all who come to him through Christ.

By raising Christ from the dead,
God demonstrates that the Kingdom his Son spoke of
is not an earthly one,
which has no relevance beyond the grave,
but a heavenly one
in the spiritual realm which God inhabits,
which is beyond our earthly imagination.

Jesus said that he was going to prepare a place for us,
where we would go and dwell with him eternally beyond the grave.

So what Paul is saying here is that all of this holds,
provided Jesus was raised from the dead.

If not,
then our faith is futile
and we are still in our sins.
We remain unsaved.

If Christ was not raised
then there can be no resurrection of the dead.

If the one who brought others back to life,
cannot himself be brought back to life,
then what hope is there for us.

We are condemned to the futility of life envisaged by the unbeliever.
And he then goes on to reassert the historic fact that Jesus was raised from the dead.

There were many eye-witnesses,
and Paul met those who had seen Jesus at first hand after the crucifixion,
which is where we started this evening.

But what about us,
today,
this Easter Sunday evening.

What do *we* believe,
and here I challenge the Christians amongst you tonight,
rather than the non-Christians.

If you don't believe in the resurrection,
then your faith is futile
and we should go home tonight and ponder whether we can go on.
The resurrection is so central to the Christian position
that it falls apart without it.

But if we believe it,

ah, then what a difference it will make to our lives.
For no longer is life
with all its fears and wonders
pointless and purposeless,
now it is full of hope and reward.
It is meaningful.
It is going somewhere.

What we do counts
and what I think matters
and at the end of this earthly journey,
another journey awaits us beyond the grave
even richer and more wonderful than this one.

What I do for others becomes a fulfilment of who I am and what I want to be.
But more than that it makes a difference to their lives too,
for their lives have the capacity to go somewhere.

And perhaps most important of all,
I can serve my Lord,
with confidence and fervour,
knowing that one day I shall meet him where he lives
and spend eternity in his presence in my resurrected body.

May we all have that hope
and live our exciting lives under his authority
and in the knowledge and warmth of his love.

Amen

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27 March 2005