

Easter Day, Mar 31st 2013 (Rev Rachel Young)

Readings: Acts 10:34-43 1 Cor 15:19-26 John 20:1-18
Theme: The Resurrection
Aims: To encourage belief in the Christian teaching about the resurrection of the body

Here we are today celebrating the most important festival of the church's year: Easter, the day on which Jesus was resurrected from the dead.

I wonder how often you think about resurrection?

I'd hazard a guess that it's only once a year...and even then, perhaps only in passing, perhaps as we say 'Christ is risen' or as we hear the story again from the Gospels and sing Easter hymns.

But I would encourage you to think about it more, and more often. Because the Christian belief in the resurrection – and by that, I mean not just the resurrection of Jesus – is fundamental to our faith and witness.

So today I'd like to set you off on your thinking journey.

I'd like to talk this morning about two things, with reference especially to the reading from 1 Corinthians chapter 15 we heard earlier:

- What is Christian belief in the resurrection?
- And what difference does believing in it make to our Christian lives?

So, what is Christian belief in the resurrection?

Well, here's another question to ponder first:

What do you think happens when we die? (perhaps that's another thing that we don't think about very often – our culture is very 'death averse', we're not encouraged to consider it or even to face the fact of it, until we come face to face with death in some way).

In our culture today, many people think that when we die, our soul continues to live in a place called heaven, and that we will meet those who have died again one day, when we ourselves pass on. Some might also think that our soul becomes one of the stars, or an angel. These are not new ideas – infact this last one can be found in the Old Testament, among a variety of ideas of what happens when we die.

The first idea, that our soul continues to live on, is an old pagan idea, and one with which the Greek first century Corinthians were familiar.

The apostle Paul wrote his first letter to the Corinthian church in the early fifties AD, about twenty years after the death of Jesus. It was written to correct some of their beliefs and behaviours, and chapter 15 addresses the topic of resurrection.

Verses 3 to 7 are the earliest known written Christian creed (or statement of belief);

“That Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures...”

Paul goes on to say, “and that he appeared to Cephas (Peter), then to the twelve..” and after a few more appearances, Jesus appeared to Paul himself, on the Damascus road, the place of his conversion. Paul believed it was the resurrected Christ who appeared to him.

He says this to the Corinthians to remind them about the background of the faith he handed on to them. Because it becomes clear, as he continues in this chapter, that the Corinthians were losing their faith in the resurrection. Paul was concerned about this, for reasons which will become clear later.

In the passage just before our reading started, Paul puts forward a logical argument:

“Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation to you has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ – whom he did not raise, if it is true that the dead are not raised...”

Then we come to verse 19, where today’s reading started:

“If for *this life only* we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.”

For Paul, the resurrection of Jesus was the foundation of his faith, and of the faith he thought he had passed on to the Corinthians.

Paul was a well educated Jew, and the Jewish world (with the exception of the Sadducees) believed in resurrection. That is, they believed in the resurrection of people *at the end of time*, a time when God would establish his rule over the earth, the dead would be raised, and Israel would be re-established.

This was a belief in a *bodily* resurrection, not a spiritual one. Hebrew thought is rooted in the material – as is Christian thought, as illustrated when we describe Jesus as being ‘incarnated’, into human flesh. The early Christians also believed in a bodily resurrection at the end of time – the last judgement, when ‘the trumpet will sound’ (as Paul puts it later in 1 Cor 15) and Jesus will return.

Jesus being resurrected wasn’t part of the Jewish expectation at all – as Paul puts it in 1 Cor 15 verses 23-24, Christ was ‘the first fruits’, the first person to be resurrected; ‘then at his coming, those who belong to Christ’ will be resurrected; ‘then comes the end, when Jesus

hands over the kingdom to God the Father'. At this point, there will be a new heaven and a new earth – a real, physical one – where resurrected bodies will live.

I don't know if any of you have seen the most recent 'Hitch Hikers' Guide to the Universe' film, made in 2005 with Martin Freeman in the lead role? The story, briefly, is that Arthur Dent wakes up one morning to find that his house is going to be demolished to make way for a new road. But it turns out that this road is a hyperspace bypass and the whole world is going to be demolished – and it is (by the Vogons, but that's another story..). But at the end of the film there's this wonderful sequence when earth is remade, in a huge factory, and Arthur is shown round...pictures of flowers blooming, butterflies, mountains, seas...it's wonderful! And when I saw it, I thought of 'the new heaven and new earth'. Keep that in your mind as you consider what God has in mind for us at the end of time.

This, then, is Christian belief in the resurrection.
But, you may think, so what?

What difference does believing in the resurrection make to our Christian lives?

Well, there are two points to be made here.

First, the *fact* of Jesus' resurrection – the surprise that the Jewish first Christians were not expecting – means that we don't have to wait until the end of time for the coming of the *kingdom of God*.

It has already started. It started with the life and ministry of Jesus, his healings and teaching, and continues with the work of the Holy Spirit given at Pentecost to the first disciples, and to Christians ever since.

This means that Christian believers are helpers within God's kingdom; we have been enlisted to help God. We have a job to do – we must tell others about Jesus' life, death and resurrection, and we must enable the work of God to continue now. We can't just sit back and muse on the idea of resurrection – it has an immediate practical significance for us! And that's exciting and promising, and it gives us plenty to do.

The second point to be made is something that Paul was worried about on behalf of the Corinthians. For Paul, it becomes clear as we read the rest of 1 Corinthians chapter 15, was worried that losing their faith in the resurrection was meaning a slide into hedonism.

Verses 32-34:

"If the dead are not raised, 'let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.' Do not be deceived: 'Bad company ruins good morals.' Come to a sober and right mind and sin no more; for some people have no knowledge of God. I say this to your shame."

This saying he quotes ('Bad company kills off good habits'!) is from the Greek pagan poet Menander. Paul is telling the Corinthians off for letting their culture determine what they believe. To him, God has already done something about sin and death – so Christians shouldn't be wallowing in it, saying it doesn't matter how they live... We should be living as

though God has done this for us. As though we believe in what he will do for us. As though the Bible's teaching about the resurrection body, about a new heaven and a new earth, is for real. Why else would people (like Paul) suffer and die for their faith, he says, if it wasn't real?

I realise that there are two large topics that I haven't referred to so far, so I'll just mention them briefly here:

First is the difference between our mortal, physical bodies and our resurrected bodies – Paul has a lot to say about this in the 2nd half of 1 Cor 15, and I'd recommend it to you if you are curious, along with a commentary by Tom Wright, who explains it clearly. Basically, Paul's teaching is of a resurrected body that is real, material, but animated by God's spirit instead of ordinary human life.

And the second topic is what happened to Jesus after death but before resurrection? There is a tradition, reflected in the Apostles Creed, that Jesus went into hell before he was resurrected; but apparently there is no New Testament evidence for this belief, which arose in the teachings of the Church Fathers in the 2nd century (Tertullian). I'll stop there, before I get into trouble, and let you research that one for yourself..!

So, Christ is risen!

But not only is Christ risen, Christian teaching says that we will all be raised, at the end of time, when God creates a new heaven and a new earth. We will have bodies which are animated by God's spirit. And until then, we are called by God to take part in the coming of his kingdom, here and now. We are co-workers with the Holy Spirit, continuing Christ's work on earth. We have plenty to do!

I would encourage you to keep thinking about the implications of Jesus' resurrection, not just today, but in the coming months, and its role as the foundation for your faith. Read around the subject and delve into what different commentators say.

Meanwhile, as we take Holy Communion this morning, let's come before God and ask him for an infilling of his Holy Spirit, so that we can help him in his kingdom work here and now, and 'live and work to his praise and glory'.
Amen.