

St. Mary's Holy Communion Sunday 27th March 2016

Easter Sunday

Acts 10:34-43

1 Corinthians 15:19-25

Luke 24:1-12

what's your favourite bit about Easter? is it the chocolate eggs? or the signs of early spring? or the end of your Lent disciplines, so you can eat and drink your favourite things again?

for me there's a lifting of the heart, maybe because I'm coming to the end of a busy time, and the start of a few days' break! but more importantly, because if we've really entered into the pain and sorrow of Holy Week with Jesus and his disciples, this Day of Resurrection turns all that round, into joy and celebration

so we say, today, 'Alleluia, Christ is risen; He is risen indeed, Alleluia!'; and we affirm and celebrate the resurrection in our readings, hymns and prayers

but why should we believe in the resurrection of Jesus? and I mean 'why' both senses: what should *cause* us to believe in it? and what is the *purpose* of believing in it?

the straightforward answer to the 'cause' question is that we believe it because of the witness of those who saw Jesus alive again on that first Easter Day and after: Mary Magdalene, Peter and the rest

the trouble is that today's Gospel reading from Luke 24 is a bit of a teaser: no one actually sees the risen Jesus yet! you need to read on to the encounter on the Emmaus Road and the appearance in the upper room, to get confirmation of what the angels said to the women at the tomb: 'he is not here, but has risen'

by the time we get to Acts 10, however, and Peter's sermon to Cornelius and his household, the stories of all the different meetings with the risen Jesus have been told and retold a thousand times; as Peter sums it up here: 'God raised Jesus on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead': their testimony is good reason for us to believe

I think it's worth pointing out that this was not what they were expecting! they did not go to bed on the Saturday thinking to themselves, 'tomorrow's the big day; it may have been tough yesterday on the cross, but he'll be back with us again first thing tomorrow and then everything will be ok!'; no, they were not expecting the resurrection!

yes, afterwards, when they thought about all Jesus told them beforehand, they realised they could have seen the resurrection coming; but on Easter Day itself, when the women brought news of the empty tomb and the angel's message to the disciples, 'these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them': it was a big surprise!

but again, when we get to Acts 10, they've had the face-to-face encounters, and made sense of all Jesus said and did; so now Peter can say with confidence, that Jesus is: 'Lord of all' and 'judge of the living and the dead'

that's a complete change of outlook, and it's only a belief in the resurrection of Jesus that can explain that change in the disciples; and that is then good *reason* for us to believe it too!

now to the *purpose* question: what do we believe in the resurrection *for*? what is the *point* of it? and if we find it difficult to believe in, does that really matter?

in Paul's first letter to the Christians in Corinth he clearly thinks it does matter; just why people were questioning the resurrection isn't made clear; perhaps they felt their faith should be purely 'spiritual' and not depend on anything as messy and physical as a body being alive again – and perhaps we have some sympathy for that view?

so, what's Paul's case here? in the verses before the ones we read today he sets out the *negative* argument – what follows if we abandon faith in the resurrection? in brief, Paul says: if Christ is not raised then our faith is futile, we have no hope and no promise of forgiveness; and he ends: 'If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied'

so without the resurrection, our faith is pathetic and misguided, and we might as well give up on it now! let's just go home and enjoy our roast dinners!

I'm reading Stephen Fry's book, 'Making History', where use of a time machine prevents the conception of Adolf Hitler; I'm just now getting into the alternate history that follows – how different would the world be, if Hitler had never existed?

how different would our world be, without the resurrection of Jesus? the tiny Jesus movement would have died with him, and the history of the world since then would surely have been very different – we certainly would not be here now!

because, as far as Paul is concerned, there is simply no point to the Gospel, or to faith in Jesus, without the resurrection – that's the *negative* part of the argument

then to the *positive*: 'but in fact Christ has been raised, the first fruits of those who have died ...for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ'

for Paul a key point of Jesus' resurrection is that it guarantees *our* resurrection; because we can say, after Good Friday, 'Jesus is alive', there is the promise that we too shall live, and that 'death, the last enemy, has been destroyed'

is that thought a significant element of our faith? do we look forward with hope and longing to our own resurrection? perhaps when we think with sorrow of those we love who have died, we do want to be sure of seeing them again? on the other hand, we're pretty comfortable for now in this life, so maybe we're not that keen on heading for the next life any time soon?

there's no doubt that those with less comfortable lives find this an important thing to cling on to; for those who suffer persecution and even martyrdom for their faith, this hope of resurrection is often what sustains them

but there is more even than that: 'Easter is much bigger than Easter', I read on one of my Bible commentary websites; that is, Easter is about more than the simple fact of Jesus being alive again; however amazing that is, it is only a pointer – towards who Jesus really is, and what he has achieved for us on the cross, and the hope we can have of life beyond death; but bigger still than that, it's a pointer towards a whole new reality that has begun to unfold; here's a quote from the website:

‘On the first Easter, God established the course toward which he is drawing all reality. On that day, God did not simply change the existence of Jesus from being dead to being alive. God changed the destiny of the cosmos in the first-fruit defeat of Death by raising Christ from the dead.’

‘God changed the destiny of the cosmos’: where do we think the universe is heading? the scientists tell us it started with a Big Bang; one theory is that it will end with a Little Whimper, as entropy takes its inevitable course, things fall apart and everything returns to a vast, shapeless nothingness; is that where we’re heading?

the physics may say, ‘yes!’, but the resurrection of Christ says ‘no!’. death – not just Jesus’ death or our death, but the ending and falling apart of all things, *that cosmic enemy number one*, that universal death has been undone; it does not have the last word; God does!

so, should we believe in the resurrection? yes, because the disciples witnessed it and passed on that message to us; yes, because it makes sense of Jesus; yes, because it gives us each hope for our own resurrection; but last of all, yes, because it assures us of where the universe is going, and that we have a place in it for ever

these are all good reasons for us to say, ‘Alleluia, Christ is risen; He is risen indeed, Alleluia!’