

Life After Death

1 Cor 15:12-20 (p 1156); Luke 6:17-26 (p 1034)

“But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep.” So what’s your view of life after death? And does it matter?

Every week we gather here in the presence of God Almighty and solemnly declare our faith using the words of one of the creeds:

“I believe ... on the third day he rose again; I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting”

“We believe ... on the third day he rose again; We look forward to the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.”

Paul quite rightly understood that the bodily Resurrection of Jesus is the cornerstone of the Christian faith; he certainly believed it matters! He writes

“If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile ... we of all people are most to be pitied”

Yet even the occasional bishop has denied the physical reality of the resurrection, seeing it solely as a spiritual sign.

As the cornerstone of the Christian faith, the historical resurrection of Jesus has been more heavily brought into question in more different ways than perhaps any other aspect of Christian doctrine.

So where do you stand? Do you stand with Paul in his unequivocal confirmation of the fact of Jesus real death and resurrection in human history – or do you stand with the Sadducees who were reprimanded by Jesus for their failure to believe?

Jesus reminded them how God himself, described himself to Moses at the burning bush: “I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.” Jesus goes on to say “He is not the God of the dead, but of the living.” Jesus then told the Sadducees “You are badly mistaken.” (Mark 12:34-37).

Talking to Martha following the death of Lazarus, Jesus said “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

Yet it’s so hard to sit here and try to imagine being raised into a new body to a new life beyond the limitations of time and space and mortality.

Today I hope to lay out a few thoughts to help us get there, *and a few thoughts on why the assaults on the Resurrection of Jesus are weak and unfounded. To do this properly would take several hours, so of necessity I will be skimming the surface. However the arguments are well expressed in the following books.*

- *Paul E Little Know why you believe IVP*
- *Amy Orr-Ewing Why Trust the Bible IVP*
- *Frank Morison Who Moved the Stone? Faber*

Their references can be found in text of this sermon on our website. Or you can talk to me or browse the books over coffee at the end of this service.

The West has created a culture that desperately seeks to be free from God; that wants to be in charge of its own life, morality and destiny. There are many ‘isms’ that pursue this philosophy – communism, humanism, atheism, modernism, post-modernism, secularism. They seek to undermine and eventually destroy belief in God. By and large

they have recruited science and tolerance to their cause. Their attack on the Christian faith comes on a number of fronts, for example:

- 1. The Bible has been corrupted over time, so can't be trusted*
- 2. The Bible was always fantasy not history, so can't be trusted*
- 3. Miracles don't happen, therefore they must be dismissed*
- 4. Faith is irrational, so it can't be true*
- 5. Only matter and energy exist, so God can't exist*
- 6. The Bible contradicts science, and so must be false*
- 7. Jesus never died, so he can't have been raised*

And I could go on and on...

In every case, the basic assumption behind each of these assertions has been robustly refuted. For example if we compare the New Testament to Caesar's writings which were only a little earlier, we find that:

- The earliest surviving fragment of Caesar was written some 1000 years after the events; but for the New Testament it is only 25 to 50 years later, and within the living memory of eye-witnesses*
- There are only 10 surviving early manuscripts from Caesar, yet there are about 24,000 from the New Testament.*
- What we now know of the detail of times, places and names shows that the New Testament was written by or alongside reliable witnesses.*

In fact, by any standards of historical research, the death and resurrection of Jesus is probably the best attested event in ancient history.

For now I would like to assume that God exists, miracles happen, faith is rational, and the New Testament is a reliable historical source of events that actually happened. If you want to know why, read those

books! Paul did not have to face these modern and post-modern objections, so he does not address them in his letters.

Paul faced the scepticism of the people of Corinth who knew that people did not rise from the dead! Essentially they sided with the Sadducees, whom Jesus himself had to correct. We must never think that ancient people were somehow more gullible than us. They weren't – which is why they were sceptical. It's why when Jesus performed miracles they were amazed and wanted answers "Who is this?"

We know the Romans were highly proficient at crucifixion. We know that the crowds knew who Jesus was, and what he looked like. His execution was a public spectacle. The Romans and the Jewish Authorities had every reason to make sure they killed the right man. People knew what dead looked like; they knew when a mixture of blood and water ran from Jesus side that he had been dead for a while. They knew people didn't rise from the dead, which is why the first reactions were all of dis-belief, until reality dawned and they could no longer dis-believe. Even in the face of martyrdom they would not deny the resurrection of Jesus. There's no possibility that they got the wrong body or the wrong tomb – if they did the authorities would have been very eager to quash this new movement, simply by producing the right body or pointing to the right tomb – but they couldn't.

So we're left with a bald historical fact that Jesus died, was buried and on the third day rose from the dead in bodily form. Full Stop! Paul simply faces the Corinthian church with a long list of over 500 witnesses – including himself, many of whom were still alive at the time. He simply stated that these bald facts are the whole basis of the Christian faith and have been since Peter preached at Pentecost. He does this just prior to our passage in verses 1-11.

But these facts demand super-natural intervention, and so they have profound implications.

- If Jesus was raised from the dead, then God exists and endorses Jesus as his true Son and Messiah
- If Jesus was raised from the dead, then the resurrection of the dead, which Jesus preached, is real.
- If Jesus was raised from the dead, then death itself has been conquered. So we can be free from the curse of The Fall. We can be forgiven. Our relationship with God can be restored.

Paul preaches through the negative consequences of the alternative – If Christ has not been raised then... but concludes with that great declaration “But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, **the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep.**” And in this sentence, he declares that we too can be raised to new bodily life.

This future hope is directly in line with Jesus own teaching: “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die.”

To resolve this apparent paradox, and to understand our own future, we need to realise that to be truly human, we have two intertwined lives. We have biological life, which keeps our body ticking over; and we have spiritual life - God given life, breathed into us by the breath of God. Our biological life may come to an end, but our spiritual life can continue.

When my mother was in a psychiatric ward, her sister came to visit. After seeing my mum she simply said “That’s not Renee in there.” She knew that the person we truly are is far more than our flesh and blood. Thankfully my mum was restored to us and had nearly a decade of further life to enjoy with her family and friends.

As Jesus said “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather be afraid of the one who can destroy both body and soul in hell.” (Matt 10:28)

It is this spiritual life which gets re-embodied, not in our existing, decaying bodies but in utterly transformed bodies. Still physical but no longer subject to the constraints of nature as our science understands it. As Paul goes on to state (vv 42-44) “The body that is sown is perishable, is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.” We can only glimpse in our imaginations what this might be like, but we can know it will be so much better than what we experience today.

I love the tale of twins chatting together in their mother’s womb. Speculating about their future, one twin turns to the other and asks “Do you think there’s life after birth?”

Jesus declaration to Martha ended with a question, and it is a question we must each answer for ourselves. Jesus said “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

Amen.