

*"The pastoral staff of Covenant Life Church all put
aside time to read and discuss Lifted—you should too."*

—JOSHUA HARRIS

Lifted



Experiencing the
Resurrection Life

SAM ALLBERRY

Sam Allberry has written a wonderful book on the significance of the resurrection. Full of great images, clearly organized, encouraging, humorous, biblical, insightful – I could go on. Reading this little volume on a central but neglected topic will benefit your life. If you would like more assurance, transformation, hope and purpose, this book shows you how we get all that from the resurrection of Christ.

—**Mark Dever**, *Pastor, Capitol Hill Baptist Church,
Washington DC*

I think this book rocks! All Christian people need to know the great joy of living in the light of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Sam Allberry has done us all a favour in writing such an engaging and readable book about such a vital subject. It is by turns amusing, moving, encouraging and profound. Writing out of his years of ministry to university students and from his own Christian experience, Sam helps us to look to a familiar horizon with fresh eyes. *Lifted* is a book that could easily form the centre of a discussion group, but individual readers will be – well, ‘lifted’! – by what they find here.

—**Dr Michael Jensen**, *Lecturer in Christian Doctrine, Moore
College, Sydney and author of You: An Introduction*

Lots of Christians discuss and think about the effect of Jesus’ death on their lives, but many seem to be confused about how the resurrection fits into the picture. *Lifted* will help Christians of all ages and stages worship the Jesus who really is alive for the glorious hope he offers us.

—**Maurice and Anna McCracken**, *UCCF Relay Co-ordinators*

Very fresh and accessible – full of nice personal illustration and clear explanation.

—**Mark Meynell**, *Senior Associate Minister, All Souls Church,
Langham Place, London*

Exactly what we need: joy-giving gospel truth, served up garden fresh. Read and rejoice!

—*Michael Reeves, Theological Advisor for UCCF*

Sixty years ago, the night I came to know that Jesus, God's beloved Son, had so loved *me* that he died for *my* sins, I was given Philippians 3:10 as my new life's verse: 'That I may know [Christ], and *the power of his resurrection*, and the fellowship of his sufferings . . .' (AV, my emphasis). After reading this book, *Lifted*, by Sam Allberry, I feel I have at last entered into a full (or at least, a fuller) understanding of knowing 'the power of his resurrection'. I am only sorry I did not read this book many years ago!

—*Dr Helen Roseveare, author and former missionary*

It is extraordinary that there are relatively few books that focus on the vital implications of Jesus' resurrection. This book helps to plug that gap with a much-needed introduction to what the resurrection has accomplished for us. Sam Allberry peppers good teaching with engaging illustrations which make this a very helpful book for everyone who wants to re-examine this truth.

—*Adrian Warnock, blogger and author of Raised with Christ: How the Resurrection Changes Everything*

Lifted

Experiencing the
Resurrection Life

SAM ALLBERRY



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To my parents,
with much love
and gratitude

Foreword

IT USED TO BE SAID that teaching about the Holy Spirit was the Cinderella of Christian doctrines. If that was ever true, it certainly isn't now. But the resurrection of Christ would have a much better claim to that title. There are plenty of books and sermons that outline the arguments for its historicity but very few that explain its significance, despite the fact that the New Testament writers proclaim again and again that everything has changed now that Christ is risen. I warmly welcome this excellent book by Sam Allberry and pray that it will be used by God to restore the truth of the resurrection to its proper prominence in our thinking.

I first heard this teaching at a conference for students from St Ebbe's Church, Oxford. We sat in a cold barn with a fierce wind whistling outside but our attention never wandered. We were held not just by the simple clarity and quirky humour of Sam's style, which you will soon appreciate as you read on, but above all by the dynamic power of Christ's resurrection. One student told me afterwards that he had since begun a habit of starting each day by reminding himself that Christ has risen. 'Now that I've been gripped by that truth,' he said, 'I feel like a new man; my understanding

of myself, the future and the world I live in have all been completely transformed.’

May God use this book to produce a similar effect in many lives. There is much that could depress us as we read the newspapers or look into our hearts, but those who know that Jesus is alive will always have hope, even in the most depressing circumstances. Jesus Christ is Lord! He has the power to change us now, so that we begin to be the people we long to be. And one day he will return to rid the world of all the ravages of sin.

Christ is risen!

He has risen indeed! Alleluia!

Vaughan Roberts

Easter 2009

Acknowledgments

IN MANY WAYS this has felt like a team project. Eleanor Trotter at IVP has shown cheerful grace and patience with a first-time author who doesn't really know how all this works, and I never realized how awful my grammar was until Mollie Barker sent back the copyedited manuscript with red ink all over it. Thank you both for all your labours.

As with any project like this, I have benefited greatly from the teaching of others. I am particularly grateful for the preaching of John Stott, Phillip Jensen and John Woodhouse. (In fact, I'd better come clean straight away and confess that some of the headings I use in chapter 1 have come from Stott.)

Vaughan Roberts has been a wonderful boss, mentor and friend, and may never know the extent to which his ministry has preserved and encouraged me. Daniel Roe, Joe Clarke, Tim Lewis, Laura Inglis, Michael Jensen and Mark Ellis were all happy to be guinea pigs for this project, and some of them even got round to reading it. God has been generous indeed in giving me friends such as these.

My final thanks need to go to Brian and Leslie Roe of Oak Hill, Virginia for their matchless hospitality during the summer this was written, and to the staff of the nearby Panera coffee shop for eventually getting rid of the squeaky toast machine.

Sam Allberry

May 2009

Introduction

IT WAS DARK AND RAINING and I was late. I was driving through unfamiliar country lanes to visit friends who'd recently moved to this region. According to the route finder I should have arrived some time ago. The road seemed to twist around and fling me about in all sorts of directions I didn't remember noticing on the map when I had set out. I was evidently lost.

Eventually the road took another unexpected turn and plunged me straight into a village whose sign indicated that I'd somehow managed to find my destination. I pulled up against the first building I could find and was about to call my friends to find out where they actually lived, when I realized that I was already right outside their window. I was happy to see them, of course, but even happier to see their spare bed. After a long, cold, damp and tiring journey I wasn't really interested in doing anything other than sleeping.

When I pulled back the curtains the next morning I was amazed. We were high up overlooking a valley whose floor was spread below. Wooded hills stretched in each direction and a river cut its way through the bottom of the valley. The mist hanging over the trees made it feel like somewhere more

exotic than Somerset. Down to the left was a beautiful viaduct that I must have passed on my way up the night before. I'd had no idea my friends had moved to such a stunning place. It occurred to me how strange it was that I'd spent so much time in this beautiful scenery the previous night without even realizing it. And yet here it was. It's where I'd been all this time.

Studying what the Bible has to say about the resurrection of Jesus Christ has had a similar effect on me. It has shed light on a Christian landscape that I'd spent so much time in without even realizing it. The contours, twists and turns that I've been navigating for years – sometimes with frustration, sometimes with exhilaration – are now more visible. I can now make sense of them in the light of this extraordinary doctrine. The truth and reality of the resurrection illuminates the detail of so much of our everyday Christian experience.

It occurred to me a couple of years ago that I'd never really heard much teaching on the resurrection that (a) didn't take place on Easter Sunday, or (b) wasn't directed primarily at the sceptic or enquirer. In either case the main focus was attempting to establish the historicity of the resurrection. It is not hard to see why. If we're honest, the resurrection is not always an easy thing to think about. We know (probably) that it matters, and that it matters a great deal. But to those who aren't Christians it can often seem as though the resurrection lacks credibility. And among Christian believers it can often feel as though it lacks relevance. It is a belief we often affirm but rarely consider. It doesn't seem pressing. Lots of other issues feel more immediate and more urgent.

Credibility and relevance – let's consider these briefly.

Problem 1: Credibility

The resurrection on a weekday

Many churches recite the Apostles' Creed as a summary of the Christian faith. It includes this affirmation about the resurrection of Jesus Christ: 'On the third day he rose again . . . ' How does it sound?

Imagine it's a Sunday morning. You're in a church service and surrounded by a couple of hundred other Christians. You've been singing of the life-changing presence of Jesus. The minister leads the congregation in a moving, heartfelt prayer of thanks to the risen Christ for his ongoing work in our lives. As you stand you're invited to recite the Creed together, and the words could not be more natural coming off your lips: 'On the third day he rose again . . . ' You mean it, with every fibre in your body.

Imagine it's a Monday morning. You're at work grabbing a top-up from the water-cooler and a colleague catches your eye. She knows you're a Christian and makes a couple of comments about how in line she is with Jesus' teaching about loving neighbours. 'He was one of the most amazing teachers,' she says. 'But I don't think he was divine. I don't think he meant us to worship him or anything.' Others listening in nod their approval as if this were the most obvious conclusion. You think back to the words you said about Christ in church yesterday. How do they sound now?

Imagine it's a Saturday evening and you're out with friends. Some have had a bit too much to drink and the talk is now free-flowing. One leans in close to you and just from his breath you know exactly what his last four drinks were. 'You see, once you're dead – that's it. Nothing else. So: enjoy yourself. That's what I think.' The conduct of pretty much everyone else around you seems to confirm

that. ‘On the third day he rose again’ – how does that sound now?

Imagine it’s a Wednesday afternoon. It’s the funeral of a much-loved relative. It’s a humanist service. Your family, eyes red with tears, give you a very clear don’t-start-on-that-Christianity-stuff-now look. You gaze across at the coffin and at the mourners gathered round. You hear someone muttering something about how lovely the service was and how it was ‘just what she would’ve wanted’. And those words come back to you again. How do they sound here?

It seemed so natural in church. But like stained glass, pale-green crockery and ineffective heating systems, what seems natural in church can be quite out of place in another context.

Is Jesus like a stuffed tiger?

Until it finished its run in the mid-1990s, one of the world’s most popular comic strips was ‘Calvin and Hobbes’. Calvin is a six-year-old boy, and Hobbes is his stuffed toy tiger. When others are around, Hobbes is just a toy, but when it’s just the two of them Hobbes is real and alive and Calvin’s best friend. They can have an adventure together for pages and pages, but as soon as someone else enters the scene Hobbes is just a lifeless toy once again.

Many people think that’s how Christian belief works. In your own private context it’s real: Jesus is there and he really did rise from the dead. But out in the real world, in the public domain, it’s not really true and feels conspicuously unreal. Outside of the Christian context the resurrection seems to lack credibility.

It helps to recognize that this has always been so. Christian belief in the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ has never seemed credible to society, right from the time of the first believers to the present day. People sometimes say that we

can't believe that sort of thing in this day and age, not with what we now know about the world. But it was no less absurd 2,000 years ago. People in the ancient world also knew that dead bodies did not physically rise. It was as counter-intuitive then as it is now. That dead bodies remain dead is not a modern discovery. It wasn't that Christianity arose in an age that was particularly gormless and gullible. Our problem with credibility is not a new one.

The resurrection: 'petty and unworthy'?

That said, we do feel the force of it. Richard Dawkins is one of the most influential atheist writers today. Once, in a debate with a leading Christian scientist, his opponent mentioned the resurrection of Jesus as being a key belief of the Christian faith. This is how Dawkins replied: 'We come down to the resurrection of Jesus. It's so petty. It's so trivial. It's so local. It's so earth-bound. It's so unworthy of the universe.'¹

This is a sentiment many today would share. Christians, it seems, should feel embarrassed by their belief in the resurrection. If we want Christianity to get anywhere in the world today, we should apparently ditch this kind of belief.

Problem 2: Relevance

And what is the relevance of the resurrection? Some Christians decide to drop it altogether, as if it were a sort of option that you didn't have to sign up to. Some ignore it and many go as far as denying it. This might be one way to respond to the problem, but as we'll see it raises a whole host of more serious questions.

Other Christians, while believing in the resurrection (or at least knowing they're *supposed* to believe in it), are still at a loss to know what to do with it. They tick the box every

now and then – if they happen to be in a church where they say the Creed, or if they are being given a particular leadership position and have to sign up to a statement of faith – but then effectively stick it back in a drawer for the rest of the year. We’ll take it out on Easter Sunday for its annual dust-off, but it’s not really needed apart from that. It’s like half the stuff in your garden shed: you know you shouldn’t throw it out, but it’s not been of any practical use for the last five years.

Two reasons to take it out of the drawer

Two things should make us think twice about this. One is the importance of this belief in Scripture. We’ll look at this in due course, but note for now what Paul says: if Christ has not been raised then our faith is futile. It’s as simple as that. The resurrection doesn’t sound like something which can be left in a drawer for fifty-one weeks of the year. When something matters to the Bible writers and not to us, it’s usually a sign that we’ve got some catching up to do.

When something matters to the Bible writers and not to us, it’s usually a sign that we’ve got some catching up to do.

The other caution is the importance of this belief in church history. It has been a truth precious to Christians for centuries. It’s a good principle for us to follow: if we find ourselves out of sync with the majority of Christians in history

then it probably means *we’ve* missed something, not them. When was the last time you thought about the significance of the Trinity, for example? The resurrection of Christ may not seem important to us, but since when was ‘what seems important to us’ a sure guide to anything?

For many Christians then the resurrection is a nice thing to believe but not necessarily vital. It's the 'happy ending' to the gospel, or, as one friend put it, the Big Tick after the Big Cross. It's as though, after the dark events surrounding the cross, Steven Spielberg was brought in to do the ending.

We need to think again. The resurrection changes everything. It guarantees our forgiveness, empowers us to change, and gives us a hope for the future and an urgent mission in the present. Four things: assurance, transformation, hope and mission. It is not that we've never experienced them before: in varying degrees they are part and parcel of the daily Christian life. Nor is it the case that once we consider the light the resurrection sheds on them we will always experience them fully and consistently. This side of heaven, we will never be perfectly free from inconsistencies in our behaviour and doubts in our beliefs. But it is the case that understanding the resurrection will transform our appreciation of these four areas of the Christian life, for they properly flow from it. In many cases I suspect we've been living among them without knowing it, experiencing them without realizing that we have them only because 'on the third day he rose again'.

It's where we've been all this time.

1



Assurance

How to shop in your PJs

I'm not a fan of shopping. My tolerance threshold is approximately eighteen minutes. After that I'll buy literally anything if it means I can go home, which explains some of the clothes I wear. And so I approach shopping trips in the same way an SAS team approaches covert missions: identify the target; know where it is; do not deviate to the left or the right; be out of the store before the next customer has even advanced to the counter.

The solution to all this, of course, is online shopping. It is wonderful, for four reasons:

1. You don't have to go outside. No need to face crowds, queues and tempers. You can do it in your pajamas in between Scrabble moves on Facebook.
2. It means you get interesting post. Now that most personal communication is electronic, it tends to be just junk mail and bills that come through the door.

There is nothing to look forward to in the post any more.

3. By the time the package arrives you can't quite remember what you'd bought. It's like someone has sent you a surprise present. And because that 'someone' is you, there is no risk you won't like it. It is me in the past sending gifts ahead to me in the future. It's virtually time travel.
4. You get to sign for stuff. I don't know why this makes me feel significant – it just does. It's something about someone in uniform presenting me with documents needing my signature.

When you think about it, this last point is quite important. If a company or person is sending something of particular value, then it is not enough for them to know that the parcel has been sent: they also need to know it has been received, that it's all gone through and been completed.

Signing off on salvation

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is God signing off on our salvation. It is the proof that sin has been paid for. The payment has been made – we know this because Jesus said his death was going to be a ransom for sin (see Mark 10:45). But we can now know that payment of his blood has been received and accepted: we have God's signature. This is why the true symbol for the Christian faith is an *empty* cross. A crucifix speaks of death, of a payment made. But an empty cross speaks of payment received: 'He was delivered over to death for our sins and was *raised to life* for our justification' (Romans 4:25, my emphasis).

The resurrection means that we can be assured of our salvation. It confirms two things: that Jesus is who he says he

is, and that he's done all that he said he would. The Saviour is vindicated in the face of all who rejected his claims. Salvation is assured in the face of all our doubts.

The resurrection assures us of who Jesus is

We need to listen in on what the first Christians had to say. In particular, we need to listen to Peter, who had much to say about the resurrection to anyone who'd listen. We join him in Acts chapter 3. Peter has just healed a beggar, someone who had been crippled from birth and who was well known to many for his prominent begging spot at the entrance to the temple. He would have been there most days. But on this day he didn't get change, but changed. He asked Peter for alms, but received legs!

Needless to say, this healing becomes a sensation. Very quickly, large crowds gather as word spreads. Peter begins to address them. But his focus is not on what has just happened – it's on the resurrection of Jesus, to which the healing of this man points. In the course of his speech Peter gives us a quick three-pointer about Jesus:

'You killed the author of life,	<i>You killed him.</i>
but God raised him from the	<i>God raised him.</i>
dead. We are witnesses of this'	<i>We saw him.'</i>

(Acts 3:15).

Peter says three crucial things about Jesus that make sense of the time in which his hearers found themselves, and show us exactly what the resurrection means for our salvation. He says, in effect: 'You killed him. God raised him. We saw him.' In other words: condemnation, reversal, public vindication.

‘You killed him’

Peter doesn’t want the crowds to focus on what *he* had done for the beggar a few moments earlier, but on what *they* had done to Jesus a few *weeks* earlier. ‘You killed him,’ he says. Here they were, marvelling at the healing that had just taken place. But these were the very same crowds who had bayed for Jesus’ crucifixion. In these three words we have, concertina’d together, all the various forms of rejection Jesus faced in the last days and hours of his life. If we were to double-click on this statement the following four components would drop down.

CONDEMNED BY THE JEWS

In the Jewish religious court, Jesus was asked point-blank whether he was the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One. He didn’t duck the question, or attempt to side-step it with some nifty footwork. It was a direct question and he gave a direct answer: ‘I am.’ It was unambiguous.

It also had a kick to it.

The name we give someone to call us by indicates the kind of relationship we want to have with him or her. If I meet a newcomer at my church and tell him he can call me ‘Pastor’ or ‘Reverend’, it implies I’m not intending to have a very personal relationship with him: I’m only dealing with him in my capacity as a church leader. It’s all very functional. If I tell him to call me ‘Mr Allberry’, it’s a little more personal, but there is still a measure of distance. But if I give him my first name it’s all much closer. It’s personal. Friendship is on the table.

One of the most precious truths for God’s people in the Old Testament was that God had given them his personal name. He had disclosed himself to them personally. They were on first-name terms. It had come about when God asked Moses to lead the Israelites (you can read about this in Exodus 3).

Moses was reluctant for various reasons, one of which was not really knowing how to explain how he knew who God was. And so God gave Moses his card, if you like. The people now had a name by which they could know the God who was leading them. It came to embody the privilege they had in knowing him personally. It became so precious that they avoided speaking and writing it directly. The name? ‘The LORD’, in our Bibles; but in Hebrew ‘Yahweh’, literally, ‘I am’.

Jesus was doing more than answering the question in the affirmative. He was embodying his answer. He was claiming the divine name for himself. The court didn’t need any lengthy deliberations. The high priest spoke for them all when he condemned Jesus to death for blasphemy. And so they handed him over to the Romans.

EXECUTED BY THE ROMANS

It was the Romans who sentenced Jesus to death. Pilate may not have regarded all this as anything more than the internal squabbling of the Jewish community. But given the claim of *kingship* being attached to Jesus, it was a squabble that had at least nominally imperial implications. Stability was the order of the day, and yet here was a situation which could potentially cause huge unrest. The crowds were baying for crucifixion. And yet Pilate saw an opportunity for both resolution and political capital. A popular insurrectionist, Barabbas, would be released and Jesus would be executed. The formal charge against him was sedition – he was, after all, claiming to be a king.

ABANDONED BY GOD

But Jesus’ rejection was not only ecclesiastical and judicial. It was spiritual. In each of the Gospel accounts of the crucifixion of Jesus, the details of his physical sufferings are very sparse.

The whole lengthy and agonizing process is summed up in just three words: ‘they crucified him’. We are spared the unpleasant details of what this would have involved. We are not told how Jesus felt at each unbearable stage. But we are told what he *said*. In the thick of the darkness that engulfed the sorry episode, we hear these words being cried out, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ (Mark 15:34).

We don’t need to know the blow-by-blow account of how Jesus’ body tore itself apart. What we do need to know is given to us in those words. Jesus is forsaken by God. This takes us to the heart of his death. His suffering was not ultimately physical (hard though that is to conceive), but spiritual: separation from the Father as the Son bore the penalty of our sins. It was as though the Father turned his back on him.

BURIED BY HIS DISCIPLES

Burial is often the moment of final closure in the grieving process. A week ago I stood with a grieving family as they buried the ashes of their mother. She had actually died several months earlier and had been cremated. Up till now the family had kept the ashes at home. But they felt they hadn’t yet fully said goodbye. So they had come to bury them. I led a short service, and as each took a turn to drop a handful of soil down onto the casket, they said their final goodbyes.

The final confirmation of Jesus’ rejection is his physical burial. He is laid in the tomb of a prominent politician, Joseph of Arimathea. The body is disposed of. It’s the end of the story – a final, all-too-tangible confirmation of those words, ‘You killed him’.

‘God raised him’

Every other human story has ended at this point. When you get to the corpse being laid to rest, there’s no more story to

tell. In a biography this is where the final reflection begins, or in a movie where the closing credits start to crawl up the screen. But Peter has only reached the conclusion of his first point, and as we reach for our coats and shuffle to the exit he calls us back with another three words: 'God raised him.' Again, he packs a wealth of information into this short statement. Having thought about the particulars of Jesus' rejection we can begin to make sense of what his resurrection means.

The story of his resurrection is the story of a great reversal – the ultimate reversal. The one who was so roundly condemned is raised to life. On the third day the grave is empty and Jesus is seen. The resurrection vindicates him, and as with his rejection this vindication is just as multifaceted. As we double-click on 'God raised him' we find it reveals and confirms his four-fold identity: the Son of God, the Christ, the Saviour and the Author of life. The resurrection shows Jesus was exactly who he claimed to be.

THE SON OF GOD

The Old Testament looked to the time when God would install his great King, one whose reign would somehow be everlasting. Psalm 2 describes something of his coronation. In the face of international opposition to him, God declares his commitment to his King with the words, 'You are my Son' (Psalm 2:7).

His enthronement would be public, and would confirm his status as the Son of God decisively. Yet the enthronement would not be as people imagined. Listen to what Paul says in connection to this: '[Jesus] . . . through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God, by *his resurrection from the dead*: Jesus Christ our Lord' (Romans 1:4, my emphasis).

The resurrection powerfully declares Jesus to be the Son of God. What Jesus has claimed before the Jewish court – to be the ‘Son of the Blessed One’, a claim that would have seemed so laughable as his lifeless body was lifted from the cross – is now demonstrated to be incontrovertibly true. God has raised him. The ‘blasphemer’ is shown to be right all along.

The Son of God – it means he is worth listening to. He has *the* inside track on God. He is able to speak authoritatively about God. One of the features of his teaching that immediately struck wonder into his listeners was that he spoke as one who had authority (Mark 1:22), unlike the rabbis of the day. The best they could do was quote the great teachers who had gone before, showing off their mastery of the spiritual classics. Not Jesus. He preached without footnotes, as it were. His authority came from himself. He had a unique relationship to God. He was God’s man.

There are times when it is hard to live according to this man’s teachings. It might be that they rub up too painfully against our own desires and instincts, or against those of someone close to us. We might be tempted to downplay the importance of his words. Many have, after all. But an empty tomb reminds us why we need to take him seriously. His resurrection has powerfully declared Jesus to be the Son of God. It shouts his credentials at us.

THE CHRIST

Peter was the first to preach an Easter sermon. His conclusion was electrifying and, to his hearers, not a little pointed: ‘Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ’ (Acts 2:36).

It is the resurrection that supports this conclusion. Peter’s reasoning is clear and unanswerable. The Christ was to be far

greater than great King David. David himself acknowledged this in Psalm 110, to which Peter directs his listeners:

The Lord said to my Lord:

‘Sit at my right hand
until I make your enemies
a footstool for your feet.’

(Acts 2:34–35, quoting Psalm 110:1)

The psalm refers, confusingly to our ears, to two ‘Lords’. The first refers to God himself. The second is unidentified in this psalm. All we know is that David is subject to him – ‘my Lord’. So David says in effect, ‘God said to my Lord: “Sit at my right hand . . .”’ This ‘Lord’, to whom David is subject, is given the place of highest honour by God: to sit at his right hand. This is not some temporary arrangement. He is granted this exalted position, and in the meantime God is going to defeat all his enemies. No rejection of this King will persist. All his enemies will be humiliated before him – a footstool for him. His rule comes from God himself and will ultimately be irresistible. It has divine sanction, and will be universal and enduring. Whoever this figure is, David clearly recognizes his own subordination before him. However great David was (and to those listening to Peter, David was pretty much as good as it got) this figure is greater. He outstrips David on all criteria.

Peter’s point is therefore this: David has told us (note, *David* has told us) that there is one greater than he. David’s kingship is but a shadow of this definitive King. Yet, since David was the greatest king in Israel’s history, this expectation was still to be fulfilled. Israel was still waiting for her true Christ. And that wait is now over. One man has been raised up from death to life, from earth to heaven, exalted at the right hand of God. David’s Lord has come, and his rule is now established. The

resurrection shows Jesus to be the true Christ, the true King. The man charged with sedition is shown to be the Ruler that God himself has appointed for the whole world.

Jesus may not be popular in the public square. Actually, it was in the public square that his execution was called for. But it is that same public square over which the resurrection shows him to be sovereign.

Western society in many ways doesn't like Jesus – unless he's in a crib, and even then there's a debate. He is like cell phones and cash: not to be flashed about in public. It's fine to believe in him, but you're asking for trouble if you start displaying him where everyone can see him. Keep him to yourself. Stick him in your pocket, and don't take him out till you get home.

The resurrection does not give us that option. He left the grave, not to stand in some discreet corner, but to take his throne in heaven – a throne that is universal and everlasting. He owns and rules the public square. We mustn't keep him indoors, no matter what the neighbours think. He is God's King.

THE SAVIOUR

Those watching the crucifixion of Jesus were well aware of the irony. This man had styled himself as everybody's Saviour. Yet here he was in utter helplessness. And so the jibes came: 'He can't save himself!' What kind of Saviour is that? It was laughable. And yet there is a double irony at work here. For it transpires that he won't save himself *because* he is the Saviour. His crucifixion was to be the means by which he did save others. Had he chosen to save himself, he would have been no Saviour to anybody else.

Back to Peter's preaching – this time a little later, to the Jewish council and high priest: 'The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead – whom you had killed by hanging him

on a tree. God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Saviour that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel' (Acts 5:30–31). Jesus is described as having been hung on a tree. In Jewish thought, to be hung on a tree and to be nailed to a cross amounted to pretty much the same thing – the two are synonymous. In fact, describing Jesus as being hung on a tree gives his death extra meaning. In the Old Testament this form of execution was a sign of being under a curse from God.

The manner of his death showed that Jesus was accursed. He was paying for sin. But not his own sin: this death is the means by which forgiveness will come to God's people. Jesus is the Saviour. He became the curse sinners deserved (see 2 Corinthians 5:21). The purpose of his death is indicated by his resurrection. The curse is overturned, Jesus' life is restored. He saves because it is our curse he is bearing.

If we are in any doubt that the cross did its work, the resurrection is where we need to look. There need be no uncertainty. The payment has gone through. His sacrifice has been received and accepted. He really is our Saviour. He didn't come just to teach us and live for us, but to die for us and be raised up for us. Those outrageous claims about his death paying for sin have been proved right. God is holding him up high for everyone to see.

THE AUTHOR OF LIFE

Death is final. When we say goodbye at death we don't expect to say hello again. But not in the case of Jesus – and not in the case of those who follow him (more on that later). In his case the natural processes of death are arrested and Jesus comes through death to new life. Here is Peter, our resurrection tour guide, again: 'You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead' (Acts 3:15).

Jesus died. Billions of people have – great leaders and philosophers and teachers among them. But Jesus passed through death, and no-one else has done that. His relationship to life is unique. He is above death; it cannot hold or contain him. His resurrection shows him to be the Author of life.

I've twice moved home in the last few years, and each time into rented accommodation. It is a lengthy process – all that packing up, transportation, unloading, unpacking and gradual distributing. But all of this can only happen because one particular thing has previously been arranged and agreed upon: my receiving the keys from the landlord. Obvious as that is, if it doesn't happen, none of the rest of it is going to achieve anything. I need to know that person, to have sorted everything out with that person and, finally, to have received

the keys from that person. The whole process depends on that one part.

All life is his and he owns it. He is the Author of life. If we want to have eternal life then he is the man we need to see.

Peter is telling us that, through his resurrection, Jesus is jingling a bunch of keys before us. The keys to life. All life is his and he owns it. He is the Author of life. If we want to have eternal life then he is the man we need to

see. 'I am the resurrection and the life,' he claimed. 'He who believes in me will live, even though he dies' (John 11:25). He holds the keys to it all.

THE BOTTOM LINE

'God raised him.' This is the definitive reversal. It is so much more than another story of a local boy coming good in the end. The so-called blasphemer is in fact the Son of God. The one charged with sedition is the true Ruler. The one under

the curse of God is saving others from it. The one buried in a tomb has the power to create life.

The resurrection is an open challenge to how people see Jesus. He cannot be anything less than the Son of God, the Christ, the Saviour, and the Author of life. God has overturned the verdict of humanity on this man, and calls on us to do the same if we haven't already. The resurrection lifts Jesus conclusively out of any merely human category. It defies us to declare our allegiance to him and worship him. Jesus is vindicated.

'We saw him'

Peter's final comment indicates that the vindication of Jesus is public. None of this has happened behind closed doors. It wasn't human sleight of hand or trickery – God did this. And he did it publicly on the stage of human history. It happened, we're told repeatedly, on the third day. Jesus' resurrection was as precise a historical event as his birth or death.

It is worth pausing briefly at this point to reflect that this is the Jesus to whom Christians relate: the man who lived, died and rose again during a particular time in history. The Jesus we know is not some abstract or ahistorical figure. He is not a concept, or even just a meaningful spiritual entity. Jesus is what he is to us precisely *because* he died and rose in human history. We cannot divorce him from these events.

A key demonstration that God has exalted his King is that the risen Jesus was seen by his disciples. He appeared to his followers. We are given accounts of this in each of the four Gospels. In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul itemizes them. There were six occasions when Jesus appeared: to Peter; to the twelve disciples; to a crowd of over 500; to James; to the apostles; and finally to Paul himself. Paul is in no doubt about the

importance of these appearances: they form part of the gospel on which believers stand:

Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.

(1 Corinthians 15:1–2)

The Jesus in whom we believe died, was buried, rose again and was seen. And what the burial was to his death, the appearances were to his resurrection. The death of Jesus was physically attested by his burial, and his resurrection was physically attested by his appearances. Burial proves he died; being seen proves he rose again.

Some have claimed that these appearances were not real. Maybe the whole idea of the resurrection was triggered by mass hallucinations. Maybe it was auto-suggestion or cognitive dissonance: Jesus' followers so badly wanted him to be raised that they were unable to recognize any evidence to the contrary.

THE DISCIPLES' EXPECTATIONS

These alternative suggestions are not new. Much has been said in response to them, but it is worth noting one key historical fact which they overlook: the disciples were not expecting Jesus to rise again. Each of the Gospels makes this clear. Jesus had predicted his death and resurrection on a number of occasions and yet the disciples had not believed him. After all, on that Easter Sunday morning where were they? They weren't waiting outside the tomb, party-poppers and streamers at the ready for when Jesus emerged. They were pretty much hiding under a table somewhere back in

Jerusalem, terrified that the next knock at the door might be the authorities rounding up the last dregs of the Jesus movement to finish this thing once and for all. When the first women to see the risen Jesus told the other disciples, it was *news* to them. It was not what they had expected. They assumed it was all over. Any hopes they had for the movement Jesus had come to establish had died when he was crucified. They were going to head back home. Maybe the fishing was still good back in Galilee.

Jesus appeared to his disciples and it was a transforming experience. We cannot account for what happened next in history in any other way: they really did see him.

THE DISCIPLES' TRANSFORMATION

We're all used to before-and-after adverts, and in many cases they can lack credibility. The image 'before' someone tries the miracle weight-loss programme or anti-balding treatment is usually suspiciously smudgy, dark and grainy. You're vaguely aware that there's someone there – if only because he's conspicuously overweight or bald – but it's very hard to tell what he looks like. The 'after' picture, by contrast, is crystal-clear and bright, and we can clearly see someone in the peak of health: his body is in great shape, or he has a frankly alarming amount of hair on his head. It's very hard to believe it's really the same person in each picture.

There's no doubt with the disciples, however, just how changed they are by encountering the risen Jesus. The 'before' picture is so *clear*. We see them in the Gospel accounts being consistently slow to understand Jesus. They're not really with him and his agenda. Once the opposition begins to rise in Jerusalem they are easily intimidated and quickly abandon him.

Take Peter, for example. For all his insistence that he will never forsake Jesus, we are given a very detailed account of

what finally led him to disown Jesus. An army? Torture? It takes *a servant girl*. She recognizes him as being one of the disciples, and his Galilean accent is also a bit of a give-away. And Peter loses it, insisting even to the point of cursing that he didn't know Jesus. A servant girl. I like to think she had freckles and pigtails. Nice one, Peter.

After the resurrection it is a very different story. We see the spectacular growth of Christianity, propelled by the conviction that the crucified Nazarene is in fact the risen Lord. These same disciples display huge amounts of boldness and determination, often in the face of brutal opposition. And Peter, whose knees trembled before that servant girl, is the first to get on his feet and declare to the Jerusalem crowds that God had made this Jesus both Lord and Christ. There has been a transformation. And Peter accounts for it in those three simple but history-changing words: 'We saw him.' Jesus has been vindicated – publicly. The historical record, presented in the Gospels and in Acts, speaks for itself.

The resurrection demonstrates who Jesus is. It is not meant to be just some mega-miracle, or trump card for the existence of God. It speaks powerfully of the identity of Jesus. We can be assured that he is exactly who he claimed to be. And because of that same resurrection, we can also be assured that he achieved in his death exactly what he had said he would – we can be assured of our salvation. The resurrection compels us to see something of who Jesus is. It also compels us to see something of what he has done.

The resurrection assures us of what Jesus has done

No resurrection = no salvation

'He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification' (Romans 4:25). This is something of

a summary of the gospel Paul has been outlining to his readers in Rome: Jesus was delivered over to death for our sins, and raised to life for our justification. Notice the connection between his resurrection and our justification.

To justify something is to declare it to be right. In an exam we might be challenged to ‘justify our answer’, in other words, to show it to be right. Paul is speaking of being justified by God: as far as God is concerned, we are entirely in the right. There is nothing to be said against us.

Paul has already shown us that we are justified freely through God’s grace as we trust in the death of Jesus. Now he shows us how this justification is related to the resurrection. But let’s be clear what Paul doesn’t mean. He is not saying that we are half-saved by the cross and half-saved by the resurrection. Rather, Paul is saying that the resurrection is both the consequence and demonstration of salvation through the death of Jesus. His blood saves because he is risen. The resurrection is necessary for justification – without it we are not justified.

Nor are we forgiven. Paul says this in another letter: ‘If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins’ (1 Corinthians 15:17). Because the death of Jesus has paid for our sins he has been raised to life. Without the resurrection our sin remains unpaid for, and we remain under its dominion. The resurrection is necessary for justification and necessary for salvation.

Why?

Why do we need the resurrection for these things to be certain? Why does the *resurrection*, as opposed to something else, indicate that the death of Jesus has paid for our sins? Presumably God could have yelled down in an audible voice that the sacrifice of Jesus had been accepted. Why is *this* his signature – his signing off on our salvation?

In the logic of Scripture, there is a reason why the resurrection functions in this way. The raising of Jesus from death is significant because death itself is significant. Unless we understand something of the biblical meaning of death, we will not be able to grasp the biblical meaning of resurrection.

The resurrection is the consequence and demonstration of our salvation because death is the consequence and demonstration of our sin.

What we need to see is this: the resurrection is the consequence and demonstration of our salvation because death is the consequence and demon-

stration of our sin. And to see this we need to go back a bit – in fact back a long way.

Understanding sin

It's Genesis 2. The Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve. God has provided abundantly for the first people. They can enjoy everything they see around them, with one exception. There is one tree they are not to eat from.

And the LORD God commanded the man, 'You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.'

(Genesis 2:16–17)

The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. It's a funny name for a tree, but a telling one all the same. It shows us this restriction is not arbitrary. It's not as if God has decided to make one tree out of bounds deliberately, to provoke and test them.

On a shared computer in our church office I once found a file on the desktop marked, ‘Do NOT under ANY circumstances open this folder.’ I couldn’t resist. Once opened it summoned a text which said, ‘You’re so predictable, and I bet you’re a boy!’

Some people think the forbidden tree was similar to this – a kind of trick to prove how helplessly inquisitive we are. Not so. The name is key: The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. It doesn’t mean that to eat of this tree helps Adam and Eve know what right and wrong is, as if they were moral blank sheets up till that point. God had already spelt out to them what they should and shouldn’t do. No, to eat from this tree is to have their eyes opened and be *like God*, knowing good and evil. To know it in the way he does.

How does God know good and evil? He knows it as the one who determines and decides it. To eat from this tree is to claim that privilege, to choose to be the one who determines right and wrong. It is an act of rebellion against God, for he alone has the right to show us how to live. As I once heard someone express it, sin is not deciding to *break* the rules, it’s deciding to *make* the rules.

We need to understand this. Sin is relational. It is trying to overthrow God. If we don’t understand the nature of sin we won’t understand God’s response to it.

Understanding death

THE PUNISHMENT FOR SIN

Sin leads to death. God said that if humans ate from that tree they would ‘surely die’. As we have seen, it was an act of rebellion against God’s rule. We cannot go up against God and expect to live, not just because God is bigger and we won’t succeed (though he is and we won’t), but because God is the

life-giver. To turn from him is like sawing off the branch you're sitting on. Sin is a form of suicide, for it cuts us off from the source of our life and breath.

This is seen in what happens to Adam and Eve. The consequence of their sin is that they live under the certainty of death.

The LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them. And the LORD God said, 'The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever.' So the LORD God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life.

(Genesis 3:22–24)

They will return to the ground. They are barred from access to the tree of life. Death is inevitable.

THE WAGES OF SIN

This connection between sin and death is reflected elsewhere in the Bible. Paul tells us that 'the wages of sin is death' (Romans 6:23). Death is what sin deserves.

It doesn't quite have the same ring for us today. Our wages tend to be delivered automatically, directly into our bank account. We don't physically handle or touch them. In my first ever job – working weekends in a local coffee shop – I was paid with cash in an envelope at the end of the week. It was so much more tangible. The wages weren't much, but to physically receive them seemed to mean something. It was

there in my hand – physical recognition that I had actually done that work. I'd earned it. This was my reward and – bar a few cappuccinos spilt down people's shirts – I really deserved it.

Death is just as physical, just as tangible, and just as deserved a wage for our sin. We really did earn this. It is there: an inevitable reminder that our lives, shorn of the goodness and safety of following God's ways, are now finite and ultimately very fleeting.

THE BIRTH-CHILD OF SIN

James shows us graphically how this relationship between sin and death works:

When tempted, no-one should say, 'God is tempting me.' For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.

(James 1:13–15)

James is thinking primarily about temptation here, but in the process of doing so reminds us of the seriousness of sin and its relationship to death.

Understanding temptation

WHERE TEMPTATION COMES FROM

James is at pains to show us that we need to look within ourselves for the source of temptation. Temptation is not God's fault; it is ours. It is our own evil desire that entices us and carries us away. It is not ultimately the fault of our peers, parents, schoolteachers or environment. Evil desires find their

genesis from within our very hearts. They are not contracted from outside, but bubble up from within.

HOW TEMPTATION WORKS

That's where temptation is from, and James goes on to show us how it works. He takes us on safari. The language is of the hunt: stalking, luring, striking, felling, killing, removing and devouring. Images from a hundred natural history programmes spill into our minds: a happy group of wildebeest skipping playfully in the savannah, quite oblivious to any danger. Cut to a lioness, crawling stealthily through the tall grass. The wildebeest suddenly look around, sensing something. There's a pounce, a moment or so of struggle, and then it's all over.

So it is with our sinful desires, says James. They are ruthless hunters. Sin is not a force to be underestimated. Yet how often, in the moment of temptation, we assume we're in control, that we can handle it and that we know what we're doing. To play around with sinful desires is to dangle ourselves before a great predator, like two wildebeest teenagers playing chicken near a family of hungry lions.

Sinful desire is also seductive. Think of those predators whose energies go into making themselves attractive to their prey, so that their victims actually deliver themselves up for the taking.

Let's put these two points together: the origin of temptation and the mechanism of temptation. Its origin is us: it is of us/from us/out of our own selves. Yet at the same time it is alien to us: the verbs used by James are passive – we're dragged and enticed as if by something 'other'. And that's the rub: in our fallenness our experience of ourselves is no longer authentic. We experience a tension, in that the 'us' that seems to operate the controls is not the 'us' we sense we ought to be. The 'me' that contrives sin is both me, and yet not me. I

have become self-alienated, hijacked by a form of me that is not authentic. There is a contradiction in my very self.

WHERE TEMPTATION LEADS

James tells us what happens next and it gets even worse. We've been enticed and dragged away. The next thing that happens is that desire conceives. Once we succumb, sinful desire gives birth to sinful action (verse 15). The sin that is birthed grows quickly and then itself gives birth to death. The whole sorry process reaches its conclusion.

I have friends who have experienced the painful tragedy of giving birth to a stillborn child. It is a horrific experience and one I'm hesitant even to mention. But it is the image James selects to make his point, and it is proper that it is so horrific. Sin gives birth to death.

What all these passages have in common is that they highlight the relationship between sin and death. Death is the punishment, wages and birth-child of sin.

DEATH THE INTRUDER

I think this is why we have a strange perception of death. It puzzles us. Death is, when we think about it, one of the most normal things about life in this world: it is finite and it ends. This happens to everyone. It's not unusual, and when it happens to people sufficiently far removed from us we can even manage to be indifferent to it. But for all its commonality, close up, death never seems natural. It seems *wrong*, something that shouldn't really belong to human experience – an unwelcome intruder in our world. And as much as we cover it with euphemisms – a loved one has 'passed away', or 'moved on', or 'left us' – it is deeply uncomfortable for us even to think about. And so we don't. The best we can do is not think about it, pretend it isn't there, live as though it's not

going to happen. We don't welcome being reminded that we will all have to face it one day.

Our unease with death is a reflection that we know more than we realize. Death, like sin, does not belong here. Sin leads to death. The existence of death proves the reality of sin. It is the consequence and demonstration that we have sinned against God. It is something we were never intended to experience.

Understanding resurrection

As we grasp the significance of death we can begin to see the significance of resurrection. Raising Jesus from the dead was not an arbitrary power-miracle. It has meaning. The death Jesus dies is a result of sin, yours and mine. The proof that he has paid for sin in full is his resurrection, his coming to new life.

New life, notice. I once heard of a missionary working in Thailand who gave a Buddhist friend of his a New Testament to read through and think about. Some time later when they next met, he was confused to discover that his friend had concluded from doing so that Jesus was an exemplary Buddhist. It took the missionary a long time to work out how someone could draw this conclusion from reading through the four Gospels. But it eventually dawned on him. The Buddhist had read the Gospels through, assuming they were sequential, not parallel, accounts of Jesus. He read each as if it was the next incarnation, and was therefore impressed that after merely four incarnations Jesus had achieved nirvana. He'd finally broken out of this cycle of reincarnation and death, and left this world.

The life Jesus was raised to was not the same kind of life he'd lived before his death, as if he was about to go through the process again. Resurrection is being raised to new life, not

normal life. As we shall see later, Jesus' post-resurrection body was radically different from his pre-resurrection body (even if there was also some continuity). His new life shows us that the cycle of sin and death in which we naturally live has finally been broken. He has triumphed over sin once and for all. It is a victory over sin and its consequence that is definitive, not temporary. There is new life to be had. Sin has been conquered.

It is therefore the resurrection of Jesus, and *can* only be the resurrection of Jesus, that assures us of salvation. It is the sign that Jesus has achieved for us all that he claimed he would. Only the resurrection can show us that our sins have been fully dealt with, and that death is now no longer our destination, but a gateway to new and perfect life.

The resurrection shows us that there is nothing we need to add to the death of Jesus to find acceptance with God. The cross is not a starter pack. It is not God drumming up even most of what we need so that we can fish around in our pockets and make up the rest. By dying and rising for us Jesus has closed the deal. God has signed for it, and his signature is the resurrection.