

Easter Sunday

Luke 24:1-12

Acts 10:34-43; 1 Cor 15:19-26

Don't we all like a good ending to a story! All those fables and bedtime stories we were subjected to as children would inevitably begin with the classic phrase, 'once upon a time.....', and would no doubt conclude with some kind of 'and they all lived happily ever after.....' If they didn't, I'm sure we'd have been very upset indeed! A good clear conclusion to a story gives us a nice feeling and a real sense of security.

But, when we consider Luke's account of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, the matter seems to be somewhat different. The account might form the end of Luke's record of the *earthly ministry* of Christ, but it's certainly *not* the end of the Gospel - the Good News - of Jesus Christ. On the contrary, the Resurrection of Christ is actually presented to us *not* as some kind of an afterthought ('And finally.....' as

they say on the ITV News), but rather as a *new beginning*. It begins with the words, "But on the *first* day of the week....." – it's an event of great significance. In fact, it echoes the account of God's Creation of the universe at the very beginning of the Bible. Just as *there* God completes his work of Creation on the sixth day and rests on the seventh, in the same way, in Luke's Gospel, on the sixth day – on Good Friday - God's work of redemption is accomplished at Calvary. On the seventh day - the Sabbath - it says that the women who had anointed Jesus' body "rested according to the commandment" (23:56). And on the *first* day a *new* week begins - the dawn of a *new* era - a *new* creation. A whole new world comes into being on that first Christian Sunday with the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. *The end is just the beginning*.

Now first of all I think it's important to respond to three common misunderstandings which tend to float around today concerning the Resurrection:

Misunderstanding no1: The whole scriptural account of the resurrection is simply a myth - it's not meant to be taken literally, but is merely a story made up to explain a deeper spiritual truth.

Well, the problem with this is the fact that the scriptural witness to the Resurrection event gives *no* indication that this should be read as anything other than *historical reality*. Just consider, for instance, the sheer realism of it all - very *real* reactions of folk to what is an extraordinary occurrence: the women see the empty tomb and are perplexed, the apostles are skeptical when told about the empty tomb, and even when Peter goes down to see the empty tomb for himself, his reaction is simply one of amazement - the penny *doesn't* immediately drop. Besides which, the fact that we're expected to believe the testimony of *women* is in itself highly significant. At the time, the Jewish legal system didn't accept the testimony of women; two *male* witnesses were

required to establish the truth of anything. So it's highly unlikely that Luke (and all three other Gospel writers, for that matter) would expect us to believe in the Resurrection on the testimony of *women*, unless this really was true.

Then there's misunderstanding no2: that the resurrection was either a mere resuscitation, or alternatively it was a mere spiritual phenomenon.

The idea that it was a *resuscitation* would certainly explain the empty tomb, but when we look closely at the various accounts of the resurrection appearances, we find that Christ's resurrected body displays characteristics which are *not* typical of a normal physical body: the risen Christ appears to his disciples who are meeting behind locked doors, he mysteriously appears and disappears, there is a strange transformation in his appearance such that many didn't recognise him at first, and so on. On the other hand, those who claim that Christ's

Resurrection is merely *spiritual* in nature also come up against a problem. Because the Lord's resurrected body is *not* simply some kind of ghostly apparition: the risen Christ breaks bread, he eats fish in the presence of his disciples, he invites doubting Thomas to touch his hands and side, and so on - all indicating that they were *not* simply beholding a ghostly being. In fact, folk at the time were well aware of ghosts and things that go bump in the night, but these had nothing to do with the idea of resurrection. No, what all the evidence set forth in the Gospels - the empty tomb *together with* the nature of the various resurrection appearances – what all these actually point to is the fact that Christ's earthly body was *raised*, but at the same time, *changed* - his resurrected body is a *new* creation.

And then we have misunderstanding no3: Surely in a scientific age it's no longer viable to believe that miracles, like the Resurrection, can occur anyway?

The thing is, though, if you look beyond Dawkins and the school of 'new atheism', you'll find that most scientists (and not only to those who are committed Christians - of whom there are many), will tell you that science actually has nothing to say about whether or not miracles occur - science can neither prove nor disprove them. Miracles are unprecedented events and science, based as it is upon the observation of precedents, can have nothing to say on the matter. So, scientific discovery certainly does *not* provide us with a sound basis for rejecting the miraculous.

Now the reason why I labour these points is because it's so easy to get led astray by all sorts of popular views about the Christian Faith, and about the Resurrection of Christ, in particular - views which simply aren't tenable when we carefully consider the biblical evidence. If you have questions about the Resurrection, may I encourage you to dig deeper and

to explore the evidence for yourself.

So, if Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, then what implications does this have for each one of us?

Well first of all, the Resurrection proves that Jesus is who he says he is. In his Letter to the Romans, Paul proclaims that Jesus “was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead...” God has revealed himself to us uniquely in Jesus Christ, who died and was raised again. Other religious figures in history - Moses, Mohammed, Buddha, Guru Nanak, and so on - all died and were buried, and that was it. But Jesus Christ died and rose again. What happened to him was unique because he *is* unique - he *is* fully God and fully man.

Then secondly, the Resurrection makes sense of the Cross; Easter Sunday gives meaning to Good Friday.

After all, thousands of men were crucified under the Romans as Jesus had been. So what made Christ’s death any different? Well, it’s because of what happened on Easter Sunday. The Resurrection makes Jesus’ death different to that of any other person in history. It’s God’s stamp of approval, as it were, proving that Jesus’ death does indeed bring forgiveness to all who put their trust in him. In our reading from Acts, the apostle Peter is proclaiming the Good News to Cornelius, the Roman centurion; his proclamation climaxes in a statement of the reality of Christ’s death and Resurrection, along with the declaration that “everyone who believes in him [Jesus] receives forgiveness of sins through his name.” In the light of the Resurrection, each one of *us* can know that *we* are put right with the living God through Christ’s death on the Cross.

And thirdly, the Resurrection of Christ means that there is indeed a future hope beyond the grave for those who put their trust in him. Every Sunday we

recite those words in the Creed, 'We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come' – but what does this actually mean? Well, the apostle Paul, in our reading from his First Letter to the Corinthians, gives us some indication of the nature of this hope. Because there he declares that just as Christ has been raised from the dead, so those who belong to him will be made alive when he comes again in glory. At his glorious Second Coming, Christ will raise those, living and departed, who belong to him.

It's a real and living hope which we are to hold onto through all the 'ups and downs' which we face as we journey on. Because the reality is that life certainly isn't a 'bed of roses'. Our Lord's body might have undergone a transition from mortal to immortal when he was raised, but his body still bore the marks of his suffering – the marks of the nails in his hands and of his pierced side. And we too, if *we're* sincerely seeking to follow Christ, have to go through *our*

Good Friday in order to get to *our* Easter Sunday - it's *not* about instant glory. Good Friday and Easter Sunday go inseparably together - neither makes sense without the other.

So, on this the first day of the week, when we once again celebrate Our Lord's rising from the dead, let *us* make a *new* beginning. As we partake of Holy Communion, let us commit our lives afresh to Jesus Christ – the Lord of all, who was crucified, who was raised again triumphant and who lives for evermore.

Let us pray:

Heavenly Father, we thank you that, through the Resurrection of your Son from the dead, you offer us new life, new hope, a new beginning. By the power of your Holy Spirit, help us to live each day as a resurrection people. In Jesus' name. Amen.