

Lent Lecture 4 – The Resurrection

Welcome to this fourth and final of our Lent Lectures. In our past three lectures, we have explored who Jesus is and what he does, we have seen how our knowledge of him takes on new depth when we take the time to consider him in his Jewish and historical context. We came to realise that on Maundy Thursday he does not just share a cosy private meal with his friends before he dies, but transforms the Passover liturgy through what he says and does. He gives us a new Passover liturgy, the Eucharist, so that through him we may have access to God's reconciling grace and learn to be his people once again. Then on Good Friday, on the cross, Jesus takes away our sins, free of charge, not because of anything we do, but because our God is a compassionate God who offers himself so that we might be set free from the tyranny of our own sinfulness and have access to his eternal grace. Through Jesus we recognise God's loving nature in an entirely different way, as God's compassion is revealed to us through the sacrifice of the Cross. I am not an especially gifted original thinker and much of this lecture is based on Rowan Williams' book 'God with Us'.

This week, we are going to focus on the next part of the Gospel narrative; Easter Day and the Resurrection. And we begin with the need to first address the elephant in the room: is the resurrection of Jesus real? Did it really happen?

What is the Resurrection?

Throughout the 20th Century, many scholars tried to come up with alternative theories concerning the resurrection of Jesus. There are three main theories that crop up from time to time to claim that the resurrection of Jesus might not be a real event. The first suggests that Jesus did not die but fell into some kind of coma. The second suggests that it only happened in the minds of the Apostles. The third claims that the whole event is fabricated because all the accounts are so unpolished and different from one another. Right from the outset, we need to be clear about what it is that the New Testament narratives are telling us about Jesus and the experience of his disciples following his death. Just like any challenging piece of evidence, in order to understand the resurrection, we need to fully employ our educated approach to advancing knowledge. In any field of study, one has to accept that currently one's knowledge is limited to and by previous experiences. In order to advance one's own knowledge, an individual must recognise that there may be more to a subject area than is already known. We may find this particularly difficult when such a truth goes beyond our understanding of the universe. For example, an astrologist cannot discover a new galaxy if they refuse to consider the possibility that there may be a new galaxy to find. The same is true for the resurrection. The resurrection suggests something that, in our everyday experience we are not used to seeing. The resurrection presents us with a new way of understanding our world. That can be a challenge. So our natural response to claims that Jesus was resurrected from the dead may be one of doubt, scepticism or even a refusal to openly explore it. I would like to suggest that this is a real problem. To understand the resurrection most fully, one has to at least be open to the fact that it is a possibility; that it could happen if God wished it to. If one approaches it with scepticism, then the truth will never be enough to satisfy our doubt. To begin with, however, it is enough for us to say that in God, all things are possible, even resurrection.

So let us explore some of these conspiracy theories of the second half of the twentieth century.

Even to this day, one encounters far too much energy being poured out into the theory that Jesus was not really dead on the cross but in some kind of coma from which he recovered after 3 days. If you have ever seen the brilliant film *Jesus in Montreal*, you will know just how seductive such a theory is. The problem is, this is nothing like the story that the Gospel accounts place before us. One has to lay aside an awful lot of misgivings in order to accept that this is what the New Testament authors are describing. The stone is rolled away. Jesus meets disciples at the tomb, in the upper room when the door is locked, on the road to Emmaus, on the shore of the lake. He comes and goes. All those different appearances in

different locations. In some he is even unrecognisable to his friends until such a time as he chooses to reveal who he is to them.¹ This does not sound very much like the actions of a man who has just recovered from a coma brought about by being beaten nearly to death and then hung on a cross until he passes out of consciousness. No, this theory makes no sense at all when we look at the evidence we actually have from the documented evidence. As seductive as might be to modern sceptics it only makes sense if we begin allowing our imaginations to work overtime and add into the documented accounts things that are clearly not there.

Another suggestion, from many respectable academics, amounts to a kind of imagined event in the minds of the disciples. The suggestion is, that after Jesus died they slowly pieced together all that he had done and taught, and suddenly he became alive again in their minds in a more vivid way – it was as though he were really with them. They began documenting imagined events happening in their heads as though they were happening in the real world. When Jewish people talk about resurrection at the time of Jesus, however, they clearly meant what they said – a person returning to earth. Nobody has yet been able to find a Jewish form of belief that allows for any other understanding. In the New Testament texts that is clearly what is being claimed. What is more, for people in the first century events were events – they were real and tangible. Sure sometimes first century writers might employ a little poetic licence in regards to some of the periphery elements of a story, but there was a clear distinction between real events and the stuff that happened just in one's mind. For many first century Jews, and the conviction we see in the New Testament, God had done something to change the direction of the world so dramatically, something that was offering a new promise and was far beyond just what was happening in human minds. It was beyond them, outside of them, and taking shape in the physical world. That certainly looks to be what the resurrection narratives in the Gospels seem to be trying to describe – a real event with cosmic consequences.

There is one final area of late twentieth century scepticism that is now being heavily discredited; a view that the raw and different accounts of the resurrection lent itself to suggest that the accounts were unreliable. It has been claimed that those last few chapters' validity was in some way suspect in a way that the rest of the Gospel narratives were not. When you think about it however, the evidence would actually suggest quite the reverse. The fact that the resurrection accounts are so raw and unique to each individual Gospel; the fact that they haven't all been polished off into a neat story, arguably suggests that what they are retelling is based in truth; real events so surprising that the writers are struggling to find the words to describe it. Otherwise, why are they all written that way. If the reader can suspend their scepticism of the possibility that Jesus rose from the dead, then the narratives of the resurrection feel very real indeed – a little more like a fly on the wall documentary as opposed to an episode in a drama series. They are trying to describe events that are clearly beyond their ability to fully understand, let alone notate. They sound and feel like individuals commentating on events that are unfolding before their eyes in a way that is beyond their experience and their ability to fully comprehend.

But one of the most compelling pieces of evidence for the resurrection is just how willing those first followers were to putting themselves in harm's way to hold on to what they claim was the truth. Even under torture and the threat of execution, the Apostles and later followers all refused to deny the story. More than that, their own behaviour not only replicated the kind of behaviour the narratives of Jesus' life describe about his death, but they also willingly offer their lives as a sacrifice and testimony to Jesus and the building of the Church he inaugurates. In St Tertullian's words; 'The blood of the Martyrs is the seed of the Church'.² The more the authorities try to kill them off, the more people become convinced by their dying testimonies

¹ Mark 16:9-18; Luke 24; John 20-21

² Tertullian; *Apologeticus*, Chapter 50

and their conviction to hold to their story rather than deny it and save their own lives. These are not the actions of individuals who have made the story up.

So let us think a little more about what believing in the resurrection actually means.

A New Age Has Dawned

To begin thinking about that, we are going to start with Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost, which we find in the second chapter of Acts. It is interesting that Peter starts with a quotation from the prophet Joel. 'In the last days, I will pour out my Spirit on all people'.³ The Apostles are acting rather strangely because, in their understanding, the last days have arrived. God has begun working out the final stages when all things will be gathered into himself. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus has ushered in the new era, and at Pentecost begins the next stages of the building of the Church.

This is our starting point. To believe in the resurrection is to believe that the new age has begun and the world is being transformed; a time during which all things will finally be reconciled to God. Believing in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, is to believe that the final days have dawned. It is to say that we believe that God is beginning to transform the world, ushering in the new kingdom.

When the bible talks about this new age, it doesn't quite mean what the placard-wearing, street corner preachers often refer to today. This new age is still completely historical and earthly. It opens out into all eternity and represents the great transition from the old world into the new.

The resurrection of Jesus marks the moment this transition both begins in history, and is also completed in the future. This completion leads into all eternity. In other words, with Jesus in the first century we can trace the very moment when this new kingdom began to be brought into this world. In the resurrection of Jesus, we also see how this kingdom will be completed in the future and opens up to us all eternity: heaven. In Jesus, the last chapter has begun and there is never going to be any other way of seeing God in the world. In Jesus, God reveals the final shape of the relationship between heaven and earth. Jesus is not just resigned to history but is ingrained in the future too. Those who are drawn to be with Jesus in his resurrection are joined to him in the future that he has already begun.

In other words, the future is in Jesus' hands. The destinies of all human beings are bound up with Jesus. Every human being now finds out who they are, who they may become, and where they are going in relation to the person of Jesus. The New Testament reveals that in Jesus the new phase has begun and it colours everything we know.

Ultimate Freedom

In and through his resurrection, we also recognise a Jesus who is without limits. No longer is he bound by material existence all that limits humanity's growth towards God in the same way. To believe in Jesus is to believe two things. That his resurrection makes him the ultimate authority in the universe and that he is alive and at large in the world. Jesus' resurrection makes him alive, free and always active, never passive. He is free to act eternally, unceasingly and without any limit. We have not only entered into the new age through Jesus' resurrection, we have also seen that that new age is completely shaped by Jesus' action in the world.

But of course acting eternally, unceasingly and without limit are all attributes of God. The action of God is then, from this moment forward, bound up with the action of Jesus. As such Jesus is the bridge between God and humanity. It could be said that priesthood is a calling to draw humanity into greater reconciliation with God and each other. In this understanding, Jesus is the great High-Priest, just as Hebrews tells us.⁴ He is the ultimate reconciliatory personality and draws humanity back into relationship with the Father. Jesus is the mediator, he passes backwards and forwards between the inner mysteries of God and humanity.

³ Acts 2:17

⁴ Hebrews 4:14-16

Wherever Jesus is, he remains in the 'Father's bosom'.⁵ That means he clears a space for us where God dwells and we occupy this space in his name. We are then, his embodiment on earth, and we have been called into the community that he created. Thus we call ourselves the body of Christ, for we are his identity in the world.

The Resurrection and the Church

Rowan Williams warns us that the Church is not 'the Jesus of Nazareth Society'.⁶ We are not merely looking back at some great genius or moral guru. Of course, for many people, that would be what they would prefer. If Jesus is just some dead historical figure to be looked up to, then suddenly all the moral imperative is removed. Jesus becomes a cosy figure who we can follow as far as is comfortable for us and leave the rest behind just as we choose.

But Jesus can't just be contained in a merely human figure. None of the Gospels depict him that way, and neither does much of the historical evidence. Once we accept the truth claims of the resurrection, suddenly the moral imperative is absolute and we are forced to ask some very big questions about ourselves and our world. We do not have the luxury to pick and choose our loyalty and obedience to what he teaches as though he were giving us just some mix and match manual for living a contented life. The resurrection colours everything we have ever known. It is where we start in our understanding of who Jesus is, and who we are.

Once the resurrection becomes the basis for our thinking of Jesus, then it also becomes the basis for the way we think about God. God the Father acts fully through Jesus his son. One dimension of that full and free action is the breath of God that makes us alive in a new way – the Holy Spirit. The resurrection is not only the underpinning for everything the church believes, but it is also the underpinning for everything that the Church does and even for the very Church itself.

The Church is called to be a community living in the resurrection. That means relating to Jesus as our contemporary not as a memory. Recognising that he is active in our gathering together, transforming the gifts we bring into elements worthy of his name. So, as we draw together we stand with Jesus in his present, resurrected life – the life he now lives in God.

Think of what we do in Church. Think of the sacraments and services. We read the Bible, proclaim the Gospel, baptize people, share in Holy Communion. None of these would make any sense at all if we didn't believe in the resurrection. We might gather for a memorial meal, but we would not understand it as a partaking in something here and now that draws us into eternal life. Without the resurrection, there is no heaven, there are no angels, there is no heavenly host or saintly beings. Without the resurrection we are simply left with memorials of past events and past people.

The theology of the Church takes resurrection for granted, and without a belief in the resurrection one loses their theology of the Church. This is because the theology of the Church must always rely heavily upon the concept of the Holy Spirit - of Pentecost. It is the resurrected and ascended Jesus who sends the Spirit. It is the Spirit that gives the Church its direction. There has never been a period in Christian history where the resurrection has not been central to how believers think and understand their faith and themselves.

What the Resurrection Means for Us Today

What all of this shows, if we can believe it, is that human beings matter. The resurrection demands that we respect individual human dignity and flourishing and commit to community wellbeing. This is more than just individual existence. We do not live in a vacuum. My actions do not unfold without thousands of untold consequences for other people. To say that humanity exists, is more than to state that my individual self is alive. It is to state that there is such things as human beings, and being human is non-negotiable. We are human because God created us like this, to be in communion with each other, to be in communion with the

⁵ John 1:18

⁶ Rowan Williams; *God with us*, p.69

entire creation, to be in communion with him through his son. This is our 'being'. The same is true for every single human, no matter in what situation we might meet them. This is the non-negotiable truth, and this demands that we each recognise every human being's right to dignity and mutual flourishing. It demands that we 'love them as ourselves'.⁷

But more than this. If Jesus is truly risen, then humanity has a destiny. The resurrection reveals that humanity is not just created into a material world where each person's material body will deteriorate into the material earth. Death cannot defeat us. The resurrection reveals an eternal destiny that is open to all who choose to pursue it. And the only benchmark is faith – entering into the body of the faithful in which the Spirit is active and draws each member deeper into the life of Christ and the place he has made for us in the presence of God.

The world has then changed, and the new era has dawned. God has acted decisively in the resurrection of his son. God's new kingdom of peace is coming into the world. We are called as one body in and through the Spirit to seek for its coming and to proclaim this as the Good News it is. And all the time, Jesus prays within us speaking into the core of our beings, the centre of our hearts. Revealing to us, little by little, his divine purpose for our lives and speaking to us words of wisdom, compassion and peace. Giving us, if we let him, that stillness that the world cannot penetrate nor dislodge. And it is here, in our hearts, that we can see the way the world will be. It is in the centre of our being that we see the path that leads to all eternity in the glorious presence of the divine creator who loved us before the world began and does not waste a single thing that he has made.

Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'⁸

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⁷ Mark 12:31; Luke 10:27

⁸ John 20:29