

Do we need the Resurrection?

The sermon given by Rev Sheila Cameron at the St Margaret's Sung Eucharist
on Easter Sunday, 9 April 2023

The readings were: Jeremiah 31:1-6; Acts 10:34-43; John 20:1-18



The resurrection of Jesus is the very heart of the Christian faith. If there were no resurrection then Christianity would have been just another ancient religion with its own particular teaching about prayer and how to live ethically and harmoniously with others. Christianity has survived because generations of the faithful have found its message about the resurrection of Jesus to be true and life-giving. St Paul put the resurrection at the very centre of the life of the church when he wrote to the Corinthians: "If Christ has not been raised from the dead, then our preaching is in vain and our faith is in vain. ... If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep" (1 Cor. 15). If the resurrection is not true, then our faith is foolish and we are to be pitied as people suffering from delusions. But the Apostle Paul, the disciples, the men and also the women who followed Jesus, the members of early church, *all* were convinced of the truth of the resurrection.

There is plenty of evidence, however, that *people struggled* to believe that Jesus was risen. Some were extremely sceptical, Thomas being the best example; he was the one who couldn't believe even when confronted with the risen Jesus, unless he touched the wounds in his hands and in his side. Only the sight of the wounds convinced him that this man was not an impostor. Many a modern sceptic has wondered about the resurrection. In her book *This Risen Life*, Paula Gooder writes about a conversation she had with a new Christian who was trying to make sense of what she had heard in church: "She had been coming to church for a while, and she understood nearly all of the Christian festivals (and Good Friday), but she simply couldn't understand why we needed Easter. 'Is it,' she asked, 'simply so that we can be cheerful after a long Lent and depressing Good Friday? Didn't Jesus do everything he needed to do on the cross to save us? Did he really *need* to rise from the dead?'"

How would you answer that, I wonder? We don't come here today just to enjoy a church beautifully decorated with flowers once more, because we find their colour and fragrance cheerful and, after all, it is spring. We come here today because of the significance of Easter; because we believe something *miraculous* happened there and that this is a place of encounter with the living Christ. We come to rejoice that the one we heard had once died is now alive again by the power of God. We come here to *celebrate life*.





We believe that Jesus rose from the dead, appeared to his disciples and then ascended into heaven, but is still alive and present with us here and now. That would not be possible but for the resurrection. Certainly yes, the cross is about salvation; and at our service on Good Friday we thought about three ways that the cross works for us: as a penalty for our sins, enabling us to live in a right relationship with God; as being about Jesus' rising victorious over the temptations of the devil - but also over the final enemy, who is death; and as a powerful example of how to bear the inevitable pains and sorrows, despair and helplessness of our mortal lives. The resurrection is the final victory. Had there been no resurrection, our relationship with God might be comfortable enough, because we would still know that in Jesus God has exonerated us, and entered into our humanity, and shared our pains and sorrows; but it would be a finite victory without a future, without any real promise of newness of life; there would be no hope of radical renewal in this life, or any life hereafter. Our faith in the resurrection brings us a vision of unlimited possibilities, of new life and hope and joy that will go on forever. That is the promise and the reality: life in its fullness now and for ever.

It has been said that the Gospel of John has the resurrection as a central theme from start to finish, from the initial turning of water into new wine by Jesus when the old has run out, right through to the final scene, his sharing of a breakfast of bread and fish with the disciples on the shore of Tiberias. According to John, Jesus not only experiences resurrection himself, but is the resurrection, as he brings new life and the promise of eternal life to all he encounters.

"I am the resurrection and the life," he tells Martha when he raises her brother Lazarus from the dead (11:25). New life comes to those who believe here and now; they rise from the death of the body and the death of the spirit and the glory of God is seen in them. And John's Gospel has the fullest account of the resurrection; all the other gospels are fragmented, but John gives us a very detailed account.

John has already given us a detailed account of the *burial* of Jesus, and we read that on Friday. He tells us how Joseph of Arimathea, a secret disciple, went to Pilate to ask for the body of Jesus, and how he and Nicodemus, another secret disciple who was also a Pharisee and the one with whom Jesus had had a conversation about being born again, anointed the body of Jesus with spices and wrapped it in linen clothes. Jesus was buried with compassion and care, and so when Mary Magdalene went to the tomb in the morning it wasn't to complete the burial like the women in Mark and Luke, but simply to visit the grave and to mourn.

And she went alone. It's Mary Magdalene, forgiven sinner, friend and devoted follower of Jesus, who takes centre stage in John's resurrection story, and it is to her that Jesus entrusts the message to the community of his followers that he is alive. This is a very poignant encounter. Mary did not expect to see the face of Jesus again; she wept, not expecting consolation, knowing only loss. Her grief was compounded by the loss of Jesus' body, all that remained of him. Things couldn't get any worse. Then in the tomb she saw two angels who spoke comforting words of sorts: "Why are you weeping?" Maybe there was better news ahead. In the ensuing encounter,





as Jesus speaks Mary's name and she recognises him, a profound change takes place in her relationship with him. She accepts with surprising equanimity that she cannot cling to him and must let him go; the important thing is that he is *alive*, though changed. He is on his way to his Father, and so cannot be with her or the disciples in the same way as before. The new relationship Jesus offers is still one of presence, but now a presence in another dimension that will last for ever.

God's reassurance is not far off for those who seek him, as Mary Magdalene discovered. God *does* care about our griefs and longings and asks us to live in faith that our sorrows will be assuaged in him. This very human account of the resurrection invites us to reflect that love comes to maturity after death. We know that love is not limited by mortality; but that there are times in our lives when we can let go and entrust those we love to God.

Yes, we *do* need the resurrection in our Christian life. The cross and all Jesus did for us there was not the end of the story. He is alive and welcomes us into a new creation. We began that journey with him into new life when we were baptised, and so we have had the first taste of that but the best is yet to come. We live in anticipation of the glory of the world to come; we are being transformed into people who will live forever in the radiance of Christ.

And what will that world be like? This is a mystery, but we can be sure that it will be the perfect fulfilment of all we hope for, all for which we were created. Amen.

This 1835 painting of *Christ's Appearance to Mary Magdalene after the Resurrection* by Russian painter Alexander Andreyevich Ivanov (1806–1858) in the State Russian Museum, St Petersburg, is made available via Wikimedia Commons at <https://tinyurl.com/mr368mad>.