**Sermon - Resurrection of Jesus the Christ (St Paul’s 20.04.25)**

1 Corinthians 15: 1 – 8, Luke 24: 1 - 12

Back in 1971, when I was a first-year student at Waikato University, other students were able to answer some of my questions about the Christian faith. Unable to concentrate on a biology text the next day, I went to see one of the students who had shared with me the night before. He said, “Ken, there are 2 people fighting for your life, Jesus and the devil. You need to choose whom you are going to serve.” I replied, “I don’t want to serve the devil, so how do you serve Jesus?” The answer came, “You invite Jesus to come into your life.” I went back to my room and invited Jesus into my life. That was a significant turning point in my life and began a journey of re-orientating my life with Jesus as LORD and Saviour. After years of reading the Scriptures, I find that there is little biblical warrant for my friend’s counsel of “inviting Jesus Christ into your life.” Perhaps, John 1: 12, “Yet to all who did receive Him, to those who believed in His name, he gave the right to become children of God,” might suffice.

In my early years as a follower of Jesus Christ, there were times when I questioned if this Christian gig was true. I was a science student and science students were encouraged to question. I would argue it back and forth in my mind until I came to the question, “Did Jesus really rise from the dead?” If he did, then everything else follows from that foundation. If Jesus did not rise from the dead, then the Christian Faith is a hoax, or as Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15, “we are still in our sines and without hope.” I was convinced that Jesus had risen from the dead and therefore Jesus really was who he said he was!

While the Resurrection of Jesus from the dead is a statement of Faith, there is clear evidence that it is the only reasonable explanation for what happened on the first Easter Sunday.

I want to outline 4 reasons why the Resurrection of Jesus is solid and the best explanation for the descriptions in the Gospels and NT letters.

1. The testimony of the women. The 4 gospels record that women came to the tomb before dawn to mourn and properly anoint Jesus body on that first Easter Sunday morning. They came with shattered dreams. They had believed Jesus was the Messiah – God’s anointed – who would lead them from Exile under the Roman occupation into freedom, peace and justice promised by the OT prophets. The Messiah, according the first century popular belief, was not supposed to die, let alone be cursed by crucifixion. The women and the remaining 11 disciples were not expecting a resurrection! However, the gospels were written years after Paul was writing his letters to the Churches. In 1 Corinthians 15: 3 – 8, Paul lists people who saw the Risen Jesus Christ. (read vs 3 – 8). Peter, the 12, then 500 at the same time. Who is missing in Paul’s list of witnesses? Clearly it is the women who went to the tomb early in the morning and found the tomb empty. Why would Paul omit them? The reason is because the testimony of women in that culture was not considered reliable! It did not count. We live in a different age and culture where a woman’s word counts as much a man’s. All the gospels have the women as the first to see the empty tomb and report that Jesus had been raised to new life. Why would the gospel writers include the women’s testimony if their testimony would not be trusted? They would only do so because their testimony was and is true. Here is real evidence that Jesus’ resurrection is true.
2. Most Christians worship on Sundays. However, the Jews’ day of worship was the Sabbath, a Saturday. The reason the women didn’t go to the tomb to anoint Jesus body on Saturday was because it was the Sabbath, a day of rest. So why did the early church change the long-held tradition and move Christian worship to Sunday, the First day of the week? The explanation is that Sunday was and is the day Jesus was raised from the dead. That was the day God changed history. Here is another pointer to the authenticity of Jesus’ resurrection.
3. When Jesus was arrested, the disciples scattered, ran for their lives. They were afraid. Peter and John followed the guards with Jesus, but at a safe and discrete distance. We have the sorry story of Peter’s denial of Jesus 3 times to people of little consequence in Roman society. And then the rooster crowed! Yet after Jesus resurrection and the receiving of the Holy Spirit, the Disciples are boldly, publicly claiming that Jesus is alive and are willing to be thrown into prison for their preaching. There is a massive change in the disciples. Why? They had seen Jesus, watched him eat some fish, hear him explain the scriptures, bless them with PEACE, prepare a charcoal fire for them to cook fish. What brought about this change in the disciples? Surely it was Jesus’ resurrection and his presence with them by the Spirit. The change in the disciples from scaredy cats to bold lions is another indicator of the reality of Jesus’ resurrection.
4. The early Christian Church was a Resurrection Movement. The life of the first Christians centred around the risen LORD Jesus.
* Consider the preaching of the first Apostles. Their preaching focused on the resurrection of Jesus from the dead (Acts 2: 24, 36). Peter on the day of Pentecost, Acts 2: 24; “But God raised Jesus from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death because it was impossible for death to keep hold of him.” Vs 36, “God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both LORD and Saviour.” One of the first letters written was Pauls first letter to the Corinthians. He reminds the Church of the core of the gospel teaching Ch 15: 3 – 4. The Resurrection made it clear who Jesus really was, God’s Messiah and that Jesus was LORD, that is Jesus is God.
* Consider Baptism. Paul writes in Romans 6: 3 – 4 that Baptism involved a dying to self and rising to new life in Christ. If there was no resurrection, there would not be any rising to a new life in Christ!
* Consider the regular celebration of The LORD’s Supper. Communion was not and is not a memorial to a dead hero. It was and is receiving Christ’s forgiveness and fellowship with the Risen LORD Jesus by the Spirit around His table.
* Consider authority they exercised in Jesus’ name. People were healed eg the Cripple at the temple gate called Beautiful (Acts 30); later many (Acts 5: 12 – 16 read)
* Consider the lifestyle of the early Christian communities (Acts 2: 42 – 47; Acts 4: 32 – 37). The early followers of Jesus began to live in a new way, to live as if the Kingdom of God had come through Jesus’ death and resurrection. There was a new level of sharing, so that no-one was in need. They cared for each other and their neighbours in a new way. Historical records indicate that Christians took home newborn babies that were unwanted and were left abandoned on the streets to be raised in Christian families. And they were willing to suffer persecution for the sake of owning Jesus as LORD. Saying Jesus was LORD was to say that Caesar was not LORD. This resurrection movement around Jesus of Nazareth gained such momentum that in 3 centuries it changed the powerful Roman Empire. There were plenty of people who had Messiah complexes before and after Jesus. Why was it that the movement around Jesus of Nazareth gain momentum so that in 3 centuries Christian Faith transformed the Roman Empire? The LORD Jesus was with them because God the Father had raised Him from the dead!

NT Scholar Tom Wright writes, “There is no form of early Christianity known to us that does not affirm at its heart, that after Jesus shameful death, God raised him to life again on the 3rd day – that Jesus was given a transformed body.”

WE need to understand what we mean when we use the word “resurrection”.

1. The term resurrection was primarily used in 2 ways by first century Jews. Resurrection was used to describe “re-embodiment”. It was never used to describe a dis-embodied “spiritual’ bliss in heaven. Further it was not used as a general word for “life after death’ or “going to be with God”. Resurrection was reserved for what happened when God created newly embodied human beings at the end of time when the righteous would all be raised!
2. Ever since Ezekiel 37, when resurrection happened, God would begin the new age, renew His covenant with his chosen and end the exile. God’s new world of freedom, peace and justice would come with God as King! In NT times the expectation was that resurrection would happen at the end of History.

No wonder the women who came to the tomb that first Easter morning were bewildered and afraid. They found the large stone rolled away, the tomb empty and the grave clothes in place as if Jesus had just vanished. Despite firsts century expectations and to the surprise of everyone, Jesus was raised in the middle of history, not at the end of history. Luke and John tell us that by the end of the first Easter day, a number of women and almost all the 11 disciples had encountered the resurrected Jesus!

Without the resurrection of Jesus, there is no adequate explanation for the rise of the Christian Faith or the Christian Church. Why would people follow a dead Messiah. A dead Messiah is no Messiah!

Jesus’ resurrection leads to encounter with him and to worship and witness. Jesus met with people in all kinds of circumstances.

For Mary it was outside the tomb as she wept in grief. While weeping she heard her Master’s voice call her name, “Mary.” Her tears turned to Joy and witness. “I have seen the LORD.”

The two dejectedly walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus on that first Easter Day recognised Jesus at the meal as He broke the bread. They were so excited; they rushed back to Jerusalem with the news.

Paul encountered Jesus as a blinding light on the Damascus Road. This persecutor of Christians was stopped in his tracks and became a fervent advocate and preacher for Jesus.

Are you convinced that Jesus was raised from the dead or are you still not sure? Have you come to the place of welcoming the risen Jesus into your life as LORD and Saviour?” Have you had encounters with the LORD Jesus by the Spirit? It is and has always been life changing! Walking with the adventure ahead with Jesus.

I recall a couple who were having a health crisis, I think it was a cancer scare. They commented that people saying they believed things would work out fine, was not that helpful. The most helpful thing was saying Jesus is LORD. In the crisis, recognising that Jesus was on the throne of God, was most reassuring.

As a church are we able to say we are a resurrection movement in the way we worship, in our witness, in our plans for the future, in the things we pray for and our costly care for one another?

Let us take a moment to reflect on where we are in this resurrection journey with Jesus.