Christ is Risen
1 Corinthians 15:1-22, 51-57

It's Easter Sunday and the events of the first easter Sunday fill 1 Corinthians chapter 15. And the question is, why? Why, when Paul is finishing up this letter Paul to the church at Corinth, does he make the resurrection of Christ the last major issue he deals with?

Face Your Doubts
From what Paul writes here, it seems like some people in the church were denying, or at least doubting the resurrection. Look at v12, 'Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?'

So it seems their doubt was around the final resurrection of the dead at the end of time. The problem is that when you begin to question one thing, other things logically follow don't they? Verse 13, 'If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised.' I mean, if resurrection doesn't happen, or can't happen, as some of you seem to be saying, Paul says, then Christ also hasn't been raised from the dead.

But it's not as if the Corinthians were the first, or the last, to doubt the resurrection, were they? On that first easter Sunday, it was the group of women around Jesus who were the first to visit his tomb. But instead of finding his body they found the tomb empty, and ran back to tell the disciples - the men - only to be met with unbelief: Luke 24:10-11, they 'told these things to the apostles, *but these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them*.' Because who in their right mind would believe a dead man could have walked out?

And then look at the two disciples on the road to Emmaus from our first reading. Filled with grief at the execution of the one they had hoped was the Messiah, they also don't believe the women: v21, 'We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is the third day since these things happened. *Moreover, some women of our company amazed us…*' To which Jesus, meeting them says, "O foolish ones, *and slow of heart to believe*." (V25).

But doubt and disbelief didn't die on the road to Emmaus. The atheist, Richard Dawkins, famously said of Christianity, "It all really comes down to the resurrection of Jesus. It has a fundamental incompatibility [with] the sophisticated scientist… It's so petty, it's so trivial, it's so local, it's so earth-bound, it's so unworthy of the universe."

But you don't have to be an atheist to harbour doubts, do you? I mean, did Jesus really rise from the dead?

If that's you this morning, however small or nagging those doubts, I want to help you doubt those doubts.

So, think, why did the first disciples, and then these Christians in Corinth doubt? And what does Paul have to tell us in answer?

Well, for the apostles and disciples on the road to Emmaus, it's obvious, isn't it? They had seen Jesus die. And they knew, they'd probably seen more than once, what crucifixion did to a man. It is a horrendous form of execution. A truly cruel and unusual punishment. And they'd stood and

watched Jesus who had been flogged within an inch of his life with a Roman scourge, be nailed to a cross, suspended in the air, fighting for breath. And they'd watched him breathing his last. And they'd watched as a soldier stabbed his side with a spear. And one of them, John, had stood close enough to be able to distinguish the blood that came out from the water, the fluid of the pleural and pericardial effusions that followed. And they'd handled his dead body.

So they knew Jesus was dead. They doubted because of the physical fact of death. And maybe that's true for you. You struggle with the seeming impossibility of resurrection.

The Christians at Corinth were different. They doubted because of the cultural water they swam in. And in tackling their doubts Paul writes, v33, 'Do not be deceived: "Bad company ruins good morals." [a quote from a Greek play] Wake up from your drunken stupor, as is right, and do not go on sinning. *For some have no knowledge of God*.'

So the reason they're doubting is the company they're keeping; the cultural water they're swimming in. Because in any relationship there is a flow of influence, isn't there. You can influence your friends, but so too they can influence you. And if you think about it, that influence is precisely in the area of thinking, of beliefs, of what you think is right or wrong, plausible or implausible, the way you see the world, or don't. Your beliefs and behaviours are always a product of the cultural, relational water you're swimming in.

And in Greek, pagan culture, what their friends and neighbours outside the church would have just taken for granted, was that your physical body really doesn't matter. What really mattered was the spirit, you on the inside. And at death you would finally be free of your body.

Now, if that's the water they're swimming in, it's no wonder they doubted the physical resurrection, is it? Because why would you want it?

But if you find yourself doubting the resurrection, ask yourself - Am I doubting because everyone else is doubting? Is this because I'm swimming in a world that tells me to believe this is crazy?

You see, look again at how Paul answers them, v34: 'Some have no knowledge of God.' In other words, their doubts about the resurrection were the result of their doubts about God. Their knowledge, their understanding of God was defective. When Paul was on trial before King Agrippa, he said to him, "Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?" (Acts 26:8).

You see, any doubts we have about the resurrection, whether that's because of the finality of death or the culture we swim in, says more about us and the god we believe in, than about the God who is. Because why do you think he would struggle to raise the dead?

Is your view of God so small? Do you think he's like you, or your friends, or our philosophers, or political leaders - impotent in the face of death? I mean, with all our modern science we struggle to keep people alive, let alone bring them back from the dead.

But what if God is infinitely greater than us? What if your god is too small? What if nothing is too difficult for him? What if he is the God of life, not death? What if he sees death as an enemy intruder in his good world? What if you were to meet him, as the prophet Isaiah once did, and you became intensely aware of your smallness and impotence and cried out, 'woe to me, I am undone!'

So, don't make God in your own image. Doubt your doubts. Why do you think it incredible that he might raise the dead? Think instead what might be possible if he really is the omnipotent God of Life.

Know the Truth
Look at v3-4, 'For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.'

Now, when it comes to Christianity, there are some things that it's ok to disagree on. The death and resurrection of Jesus are not them! This is first importance stuff, Paul says. And into the court room of what you believe, Paul brings three witnesses.

Firstly, the witness of Scripture: Christ died *in accordance with Scripture*, and he was raised *in accordance with Scripture,* Paul says. The Old Testament told us this was going to happen, so believe its testimony.

Now, maybe you hear that and think, Martin, saying we're to believe the Bible because we believe the Bible is hardly a reason to believe the Bible. That's an *a priori* faith commitment. That's circular reasoning. Sure, but scientific rationalism can't do any better, can it? It tells you we don't admit anything that cannot be proven reproducibly, scientifically, in the lab. But that too is an a *priori* faith commitment. It's a belief in a way of looking at the world.

And the atheist says there is no God, and no resurrection, not because he or she can prove that - he never can - but because he *believes* them not to be true.

And Paul is saying, when it comes to what you're going to believe, look at what the Bible says. Admit this as evidence.

But Paul wasn't the first to make that case. Look at what Jesus says to these two doubting disciples on the road to Emmaus: Luke 24:25-27, '"O foolish ones, and slow of heart *to believe all that the prophets have spoken!* Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" *And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself*.'

Jesus could have said, 'hello! It's me, risen from the dead!' But he doesn't, he takes them to the Old Testament and says look: Look at the lives of the Patriarchs, at the history of God's people, at the Law and the Psalms and the prophets, and see how throughout history God has been building to this moment. See all the pieces falling into place.

Where might he have taken them? To Genesis 3 and the promise that the offspring of woman would crush the serpent's head, but in the process he would be crushed? To the call on Abraham to sacrifice his one and only son, whom he loved, with a ram caught by its head in thorns given as a substitute? To the life of Joseph, seemingly coming back from the dead, but in the process saving a nation? To the Passover and a lamb sacrificed to save God's people from judgment? To the Law and the provision of sacrifices for sinners, and the Day of Atonement, when the scapegoat would be sent away, so the sinner could be brought back? To the Psalms, 'My God, my God, why have you

forsaken me?' To Isaiah, 'he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities, upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed… yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him… he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand'? Where could Jesus *not* have taken them and said, this is all about me!

And then ask yourself, what makes most sense of this, written by multiple authors over multiple centuries? That Jesus died and his body rotted, or that he rose again and as you read this and hear this, like these two disciples, your heart burns within you?

But, **secondly, Paul calls on the witness of the tomb.** Verse 4, 'He was buried.' It's Paul saying, he really did die. Because you only bury dead people, don't you. No! You might think. There are those stories in the press of people in mortuaries being discovered alive. Yes, but they have not been scourged with a Roman scourge, and their backs ripped off. They've not been crucified, and hung on a cross for hours. And they've not had a spear rammed into their side and their heart ruptured. And they most certainly have not been through all that and then walked out of the mortuary, convincing all that met them that they are the Lord of Life!

Doubt your doubts, Paul says, He was buried, he died.

But then comes the third witness, **the witness of the witnesses.** Verses 5-8, 'He appeared to Cephas [Peter], then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.'

Look, says Paul, Peter, the other apostles, James - Jesus' brother, 500 others, and I, can all tell you, we saw him alive again. And most of us are still alive, so interview us if you want.

And Paul could have added other names to the list, couldn't he? Mary Magdalene, Joanna, the other Mary, to name a few. But they were women, and in the Roman world their testimony would never have been admitted in court. So why do the gospels all tell us they were the first to see Jesus alive again? Because they were. Because you wouldn't make that up.

And, Paul says, the testimony of my changed, upturned life alone should tell you, this really did happen. Verses 9-10, 'For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain.' I was once intent on destroying people like you, Paul says. And I would not be sat here now, writing to you about Jesus' resurrection, if that same risen Lord Jesus had not turned my life upside down.

And the fact that Paul, and all but one of the other apostles, were martyred, and died saying, we saw him alive again, should do more than make us doubt our doubts. It should make us trust the truth.

And as you do, the resurrection has the power to change everything.

Live the Difference

The one thing Richard Dawkins said that Paul would agree with is that it does all come down to the resurrection. Look at v14-19, 'If Christ has *not* been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your

faith is in vain… And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those who also have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.'

No one could accuse Paul of soft-selling, could they? He sees very clearly what liberal theologians fail to see. That Christianity with a dead Christ is without any value. You faith is in vain, your guilt remains - you're still in your sins, and the life you live as a Christian is meaningless. In fact, you're wasting your life.

But, v21, 'But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead.' So, live life in the light of that.

Firstly, ***Live knowing your sins are forgiven.*** Some weeks back I read something a social commentator wrote, who's not a beleiver, who said that our current culture has never been more condemning of people it thinks have sinned. But it has also never offered so little in the way of atonement and forgiveness. It just cancels them, or unfollows them, or insists on the penance of public humiliation. And Paul would say, yes and Jesus is very different. Look again at v3: 'Christ died for our sins.' And in v17, he says if Christ hasn't been raised 'you are still in your sins', but he has been raised, so you're not! What our current culture won't give you, Christ does. He doesn't cancel you or unfollow you. He lifts you out of your sin. He is cancelled, forsaken, unfollowed for you. And it's in him you'll find forgiveness and atonement. It's in him your burden of guilt is lifted.

And that's what Paul knew. You see, like all of us, Paul knew he was guilty. Least of the apostles, not worthy of being called an apostle, persecutor or the church. He knew that back in Jerusalem there were children growing up without fathers, wives without husbands, because of him. He knew his shame and disgrace, just like any of us who can look back on our past with deep regret. But Paul also knew the power of the death and resurrection of Christ to turn his disgrace to grace.

And Paul says that because of Christ's resurrection, you too stand in grace. And Jesus' grace has this power not just to remove our sin, but to turn it for good.

So, secondly, ***live knowing your life is full of meaning.***
You see, grace humbles us. Good Friday and Easter Sunday tell us, we are so sinful that Jesus needed to die for us. So, the death of Christ has the power to kill the proud pharisee in us. But the resurrection of Christ tells us his sacrifice has been accepted, that we are forgiven and loved by God the Father. And that humility, combined with that confidence, gives you an inner power to go out into the world to serve God and others.

It's why Paul says in v10, 'And his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary I worked harder than any of [the other apostles] though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.' You see, when you know that God has shown you a love you could never deserve, it doesn't make you passive. But it also doesn't leave you desperately trying to pay it back, trying to prove your worth, trying to deserve it in some way.

It leaves you profoundly grateful. It leaves you wanting to love and serve him in return, simply because he is worth it. And that fills your life and work with meaning. It's why Paul finishes this chapter talking about your work, or your studies: v58, 'Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, *knowing that in the Lord your*

labour is not in vain.' Christ is risen, Paul says, he is reigning on high, so how could anything you do for him be in vain.

So, live knowing you're forgiven; live knowing your life is full of meaning. And finally, ***live knowing death is defeated.*** Verse 22, 'For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.'

In Genesis chapter 5 we get the first genealogy in the Bible. It's a list of Adam's descendants - and time and again it says, 'and he died, and he died, and he died, and he died.' Because Adam's genealogy is a genealogy of death. The world that was created pregnant with life has become a waiting room for the graveyard.

But, Paul says, a second Adam to the fight and to the rescue came. And his genealogy reads, and he will live, and she will live, and she will live and he will live. It's the genealogy of life! Because at the cross Christ took the curse of death upon himself and defeated it. And so Paul says, v54-57, 'Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?… Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.'

Live in the truth of that. Especially at a time when the fear of death stalks the world. Live knowing that death has no fear for you. Live knowing that this life is just a shadow of the resurrection life yet to come.

Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia.