The Death and Resurrection of Christ:
why they matter and why you can believe them.

Maybe you've experienced this, but when you move to a new country and a new culture, you can come across something that people do, and that everyone takes for granted, and you think, 'why are they doing that?' And you ask, and they tell you, 'well that's what we do here, we've always done it this way, it's our tradition'. Now, take the UK for example. Every year there is something called the State Opening of Parliament. And both Houses of Parliament assemble in the same hall, and the Queen sits on her throne, and makes a speech, telling everyone what her government is going to do in the coming year. And you'd look at it, with all the pomp and the ceremony, and you'd think 'wow, she must be the one with all the power, directing the affairs of the state.' But, of course, the irony is that all the power really lies with the politicians who are bowing to her. But the show still goes on, because it's a good show and it seems to work and it keeps everything together, and it's tradition.

Now, give or take a year, I think this is Westlake Lausanne's 8th Easter Sunday. But that is nothing in comparison to the one thousand nine hundred and eighty or so Easters that have passed since the very first Easter Sunday. And when something has been going that long, you've got to ask the question: 'why are we still doing this?' Why are we still celebrating the death and supposed resurrection of a first century itinerant Jewish rabbi? I mean is this just one of those cultural things that give life meaning, but with no real substance behind it? A sort of religious equivalent of the State Opening of Parliament? I mean is celebrating the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, just a tradition, that sort of keeps everything together, but is increasingly outdated and we should move on?

Well, my response to that of course, is 'no'. But I want to tell you why. And this morning I want us to look at why the death and the resurrection of Christ matter, not for culture, or tradition, but for you personally, and why you can believe them.

Why Christ's Death Matters for You
Now, the Bible gives us multiple reasons why Christ's death matters, but this morning, I just want to give you two:

1. So you can sleep at night:
And by that I don't mean Christ died so you can snuggle under your duvet all safe and sound. I mean something of what my Grandfather once told my mother. My grandfather was a real estate agent. And he ran a small business and was well respected and did ok for himself. But his previous business partner had done *extremely* well for himself, and now my grandfather and this other man were in very different financial leagues, and that had puzzled my mother. So one day my mother asked my grandfather, 'how come?' And the story was that my grandfather's former colleague had engaged in some large scale property development deals in that community that he had done extremely well from, which granddaddy also had the chance of getting in on. But he hadn't, and so my mother asked him, 'daddy, why didn't you do what Sammy did? Things could be very different now for us if you had.' To which my grandfather replied, 'Because I wanted to be able to sleep with myself at night.' You see, he needed his conscience to be clear. He didn't want to make money and then not be able to live with himself for how he'd made it.

Now, literally, or metaphorically, there is something about a guilty conscience that can rob us of sleep, isn't there? There is something about a guilty conscience that can rob us of peace and rest for our souls. And our inner self is disquieted and unsettled.

I don't know how many of you know Shakespeare's Macbeth, but it's a dark exploration of the deeply corrosive effects of guilt on a person's soul.

Macbeth was a Scottish nobleman. And in an attempt to seize the throne of Scotland, he murdered the rightful King, Duncan, by stabbing him to death, whilst he slept at night. But after doing the terrible deed, Macbeth meets up with his wife, Lady Macbeth, who is in on the plot. And a sense of guilt for what he has done is beginning to seep into his heart, and as he looks at his blood stained hands he asks, 'will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood clean from my hand?' But his wife has no such qualms, at least for the present, and she replies, 'a little water clears us of this deed.' But of course, whilst a little water can clean their hands, it can't wash away their guilt, can it?

And that guilt begins to gnaw away at Lady Macbeth, and over subsequent nights she begins to sleep walk. And on one such night her doctor and lady-in-waiting see her sleep-walking and hear her sleep-talking, as she tries to cleanse her own hands: 'Out, damned spot! out, I say! What, will these hands ne'er be clean? Here's the smell of the blood still: all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand!'

Now, what can be done for a Lord or a Lady Macbeth? What can be done for someone who begins to realize they are guilty, who is beginning to be plagued by their guilty conscience? All the waters of Neptune's oceans cannot wash away their guilt can they? And all the perfumes of Arabia cannot sweeten its smell.

But you and I are not Lord and Lady Macbeth, are we? And yet… don't we all have moments when we know we are wrong, when we are forced to face not just what we've done, but what we're really like, and there is this sense of guilt? Guilt for how we have treated someone. Guilt for what we have done, or have left undone. Well, what are we to do with that?

Well, typically we can respond to that in a number of ways. Many times we may just try and squash that sense of unease in our hearts. We tell ourselves that it wasn't so wrong, that we're not so wrong, that there are reasons outside ourselves for what happened, and that we're not to blame. In some ways, that was Lady Macbeth's approach: a little water will clear us of this deed. But the problem with that is it tends to just smother our conscience, and over time that corrodes away at our soul.

Or we may try penance. Now, I don't mean that in a strict religious sense, like we go and scrub the steps of the cathedral. But we try and offset this sense of guilt by doing something good, in the hope that we can outweigh our bad with our good. And yet, if we're honest with ourselves, we know it doesn't work, because it doesn't expunge or rid us of what we have done, and even more crucially, it doesn't change what we are like on the inside.

Now a couple of years ago a famous sportsman was forced to admit that he had had a string of extra-marital affairs. And in his Oprah-style public confession he said something along the lines of, 'I'm really sorry, because I realize that I have not been true to myself,' which was fascinating because, from his perspective, it seemed that the one he had really sinned against was *himself,* not his wife or kids – but that he hadn't been true to *himself*.

And yet, that's not why we feel guilt, is it? You see this man's problem was not that he had been *untrue* to himself, his problem was that he *had been* true to himself, and his sense of

guilt, and our sense of guilt, is because there is this standard *outside* of ourselves that we all instinctively know, and which we must keep, but which in our brokenness we're unable to keep.

And so the Bible says we feel guilty, because we are guilty, because our sin is not against ourselves, or even, in the first instance, against others, but against God, who is the ultimate standard of goodness and holiness.

And that is why the death of Jesus still matters for you and me. Because all of Neptune's oceans, and all the spices of Arabia cannot cleanse us of our guilt. We need something far more powerful. Which is why John the apostle writes, 'the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin' (1 John 1:7). You see, when Christ died on the cross, and cried out, 'It is finished!', it wasn't a cry of shameful defeat but one of a job done. That as Jesus died on the cross, he stepped into your place, and took upon himself all the guilt and responsibility, and the punishment for your sin, and paid the price for you. And that means that he has has done all that is necessary to wash you clean, and rid you of your guilt. And it's by looking with faith to him and not to ourselves, that we can find that deep rest for our souls, and that inner peace of heart, and sleep at night, because he has done for us what we could never do for ourselves. He has paid our debt for us.

But the second reason why the death of Jesus still matters for you is because it tells you that:

2. In a vast universe, you are loved.
In a New York Times opinion piece a couple of years ago, entitled 'The Downside of cohabiting before marriage', the American psychologist Meg Jay was commenting on the reasons why couples who cohabit before marriage have higher divorce rates. And one reason she saw was, quote, "a life built on 'maybe you'll do' simply may not feel as dedicated as a life built on top of the 'we do' of … marriage." And she implied that the guys in particular couldn't cope with the thought of a love that pinned them down, that committed them. Now from the article it seemed as if the story of one young woman in particular had got her thinking. And after several years of cohabiting, Jennifer and her boyfriend finally married, only for the marriage to end a year later. And, tragically, Jennifer said she had spent more time planning her wedding than being married; and that she had never really felt that her boyfriend was committed to her, rather, quote, "I felt like I was on this multi-year, never ending audition to be his wife."

Now, I read that, and the tragedy of it struck me. Here was a young woman, who had given herself to a man, with no promise of commitment on his part, just a 'never ending audition', and now her life was washed up. And I thought: why would she do that?

And the answer of course is that she was looking for and wanting a love that would be committed to her, a love that *would* be pinned down for her, a love that would see her as she was, the bad as well as the good, and still take her and cherish her, and never walk out on her.

And that need to be loved and accepted, which to one degree or another we all feel, is all the more magnified when we realize just how small, and insignificant we are in this vast universe. The sheer scale of it, the immensity of it, can leave us overwhelmed, and in comparison we are smaller than a speck of dust. And in one of those brief moments when

our thinking clears from the fog of the busy-ness of life, we think, 'does my life really have any meaning? Do I matter, or am I just dust?'

Which is why Christ's death still matters for you. You see it's in the cross of Christ, and his dying for you, that your need of a love that commits, and your searching for significance are met. You see it's at the cross that the Son of God literally pinned himself down in love for you. It's there that his steadfast, never-ending, never-walking-out love for you was demonstrated. It's there that Jesus sees you as you really are, and does not ask you to be better, does not audition you endlessly to see if you will do, but dies for you to bring you to himself, as you are.

You see, when the darkness enveloped Jesus at the cross, he cried out 'My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?' (Matt 27;46). Now you can read that and feel uncomfortable and think, 'Jesus can't *really* have been forsaken by God, he must have just been *feeling* forsaken.' No, at the cross Jesus *was* forsaken by God. As Paul writes, 'Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us' (Gal 3:13). And the curse of the law, pronounced ahead of time on those who fail to keep God's law, was to be cut off from God, and cut off from his people; to be forsaken by God and ejected from his people.

And at the cross, Jesus takes that curse, which we all deserve, upon himself. He was rejected by the people and crucified outside the city walls, and he dies, forsaken and cut off from God. Why? Because he loves you. He was forsaken so that you might be accepted. He took the curse so that all the blessings of God's committed, never-failing love, might come to you. As Paul writes, 'But God shows his own love for us in this, that while we were still sinners Christ died for us' (Rom 5:8).

And so the God who dwarfs this vast universe has set his affection upon you – not because you've passed the audition and made the grade, but precisely because you haven't. And when the truth of what God has done for you at the cross, and the full measure of his love for you sinks in, then that need, deep inside, for love and significance, is answered.

But you could hear all of that and think, 'well, good as it goes, but is this any more than make believe? Who says that is what his death means, because frankly, any number of religions make any number of claims?'

Why the resurrection matters for you:
Now, again, the Bible gives multiple reasons why the resurrection of Jesus matters, but this morning I want to give you just one reason why it matters for you.

Imagine you're buying something expensive, something that's going to cost you – like an expensive work of art. But you also know that there are a lot of fakes out there. How do you know that what you're buying is the real thing? Well, before you buy it you ask an expert, you get it certified – and he says, yes this is the real McCoy, the real thing, this one is no fake.

Now just extend that to the things of religion. How do you know that Christianity is not a fake, when there are multiple other claims to truth out there, when this has more hanging on it than buying a painting? How are you supposed to know that when Christianity claims that Jesus is the only way, that it's right? And how do you know that Christ's death *does* cleanse you, not just in some psychological way that helps you deal with guilt, but truly, in the sight

of God? How do you know that the cross really does tell you that God loves you with a love of infinite depth, rather than it simply telling you that Jesus fell on the wrong side of the Romans?

In short, how do you know that Christ has God's endorsement above everyone and everything else that claims to represent him?

Well, the answer to that is the resurrection. You see, the only one who can raise the dead is God, and in raising Christ from the dead God has put his stamp of approval on him. Listen to what Paul says when preaching to the crowd on Mars Hill in Athens: '[God] has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead' (Acts 17:31) How do you know that Jesus is the One whom God has appointed and not anyone else you could pick from the pantheon of religious leaders? Because it's this one whom God has raised from the dead. And when the stone rolled back on that first Easter Sunday morning, and the Son of God walked out into the dawn of a new day, it was the moment of Jesus's vindication. It was the moment when God declared, 'this is the one, this is no fake.'

And so the resurrection matters because it tells you that Jesus is the One whom God has appointed. It tells you that this life is not all there is, that guilt and sin and eternity are realities, but that Jesus has paid the price for you and me, and God has accepted it, and now the way to God through him is wide open.

But before we close, we need to deal with one last thing. You see it's all well and good saying that the resurrection vindicates Jesus, but come on, this is the 21st century! Should we really still be celebrating such an unlikely event?

Why you can believe in the resurrection

Now as we look at this, just remember that the importance of this was not lost on the first disciples – to paraphrase the apostle Paul, the Christian faith stands or falls on the resurrection, which is what makes some of what you read in the gospel accounts so remarkable. But this morning you can know that it stands. For five quick fire reasons:

Number One: You can believe the resurrection, because Jesus was dead and no one was expecting a resurrection. Both the eyewitness accounts in the gospels and the way the authorities responded by accusing the disciples of stealing the body, tell us Jesus died. But on top of that there was no sense of anticipation by the disciples that he would rise again, either in the surrounding Jewish or Greek cultures or amongst themselves. That someone would rise from the dead was such an outlandish idea it never even occurred to them. Instead, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus and the women went to the tomb to anoint a dead body with spices, not to witness a resurrection.

Number Two: There is no attempt by the gospel writers to describe the resurrection. Now on the surface you might think that is an argument *against* the resurrection. But just think about it. If they were making it up, wouldn't they have included something about how it happened? At least one of the later, spurious gospels invents such a description, but neither Matthew, Mark, Luke or John make any attempt to do so. Why? Because they didn't see it, and they don't try and fill in the gaps. So there is no, 'and the tomb filled with light, and he

began to sit up' moment; because they want you to know that what they are writing is the truth.

Number Three: Is the problem of the women. And I say it's a problem, not for those who believe the resurrection, but for those who don't. You see the testimony of women was inadmissible in a court of law, they just weren't deemed credible witnesses. So if you were inventing a story about your leader being raised from the dead, you would not give women as the first witnesses would you? You'd pick a man, and preferably some fine, upstanding man of the community as your witness. But what do the gospel writers do? Despite the fact that they have two such men, Joseph and Nicodemus who would have made excellent first hand witnesses, they tell us it was the women who first saw Jesus raised from the dead. Now why on earth would they say that? Because that is what happened. As John says, 'on the first day of the week [Sunday], Mary Magdalene came to the tomb' (John 20:1).

Number Four: The doubts. The response of the disciples to the women telling them about the empty tomb and seeing Jesus alive again was this is 'an idle tale' (Luke 24:11), this is just women's talk. Why? Because they knew that the dead don't rise.

And yet, virtually to a man, over the next 30 or so years, they gave their lives telling people that this Jesus of Nazareth, had indeed been raised from the dead.

And that's Number Five: the cost. The cost these disciples paid. Just ask yourself, what happened to persuade these men, strict Jewish monotheists, to worship a man, Jesus, as God; what happened to persuade them to change their day of worship from the Sabbath, engrained in their lives for centuries, from Saturday, to a Sunday, the Lord's day; what happened to persuade them that this was no idle tale, but something worth giving their lives for, at the cost of their lives? Something must have happened. And the answer: the resurrection of Jesus from the dead happened.

So, this Easter, Jesus' death and resurrection matter for you because they tell you that your sin and guilt have been washed away and you are loved by God beyond measure, and that just as the disciples discovered, neither death nor life have any fear for you, instead you can build your life on it.