On the Third Day
John 20:1-21

Recently in the students' group we were made to think about how the beginning of a good book captures your attention, and it draws you in so you don't want to put it down. Like the opening to Jane Austin's *Pride and Prejudice*: 'it is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.' Or C.S Lewis' *Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, 'There was a boy called Eustace Clarence Scrubb, and he almost deserved it.' But one of the best has to be Dickens' *Christmas Carol*: 'Marley was dead. To begin with.' And he goes on, 'There is no doubt that Marley was dead. This must be distinctly understood, or nothing wonderful can come of the story I am going to relate.'

And what makes Christianity stand out in a sea of religions is that it stands, or falls, on the life of a man who we are told was dead to begin with. Now, if you've been a Christian for a while, maybe the ridiculousness of that claim doesn't strike you: that a man called Jesus of Nazareth was crucified on a Roman cross, and that three days later he was raised to life. But if you're not yet a Christian, or if you spend any time talking to people who aren't yet Christians, then you'll know just how unbelievable the idea of the resurrection is. Because once you're dead, you're dead! So why base the whole thing on something as unbelievable as the resurrection? Shouldn't we just sweep the idea of the resurrection under the carpet, as an embarrassment, and make it all a bit intellectually more palatable?

Well, not according to the first apostles. Listen to Paul, 'I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins… that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day' (1 Cor 15:3-4). That's hardly the attitude of a man prepared to sweep the resurrection under the carpet is it? If you're going to rank what matters in Christianity, says Paul, then right at the top is 'Jesus Christ was raised from the dead'. This is of *first* importance.

And Paul goes on: 'If Christ has *not* been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain' (1 Cor 15:14). I'm wasting my time, and so are you, Paul says. Worse, he says, 'If Christ has not been raised your faith is futile' (1 Cor 15:17). Now, if it wasn't bad enough believing something vain and futile, he piles it on even more. 'If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied' (1 Cor 15:19). Now how do you like it when people pity you in a condescending way? Not a lot. But they should, Paul says, if you call yourself a Christian, but Christ has not been raised.

So, Christianity stands or falls on the truth of whether or not Jesus was physically raised from the dead. Pull out that cornerstone, and the whole building crashes down. No resurrection, no first Easter Sunday, and it's all vain, futile, pitiable.

But what if it is true? What if Jesus really was physically raised from the dead? Wouldn't that change everything?

So, my first point this morning…

How can you know it's true?

1. Jesus was dead – to begin with

You see, before the passage that we just read, John tells us stuff that should leave you in no doubt that when Jesus was taken down from the cross, he was dead. And in the words of Dickens, that must be distinctly understood, or nothing wonderful can come of the story. John says that when the Romans wanted to speed up the execution of the three men they had crucified, they went to break their legs: John 19:32ff: 'So the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first, and of the other who had been crucified with him. But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water.' Now, Roman soldiers dealt in death. They knew he was dead, and they proved it by spearing his heart.

Then John tells us that a man called Joseph of Arimathea 'asked Pilate that he might take away *the body* of Jesus' (John 19:38). A mangled, scourged, beaten, crucified body. A dead body. And Joseph and Nicodemus, 'took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews' (John 19: 40), and they put the body in a tomb.

Now why did they do all that? Why did Joseph and Nicodemus wrap the body in a shroud? Why the burial spices? Why put the body in a tomb? Why do the ladies, who we know were also there, go away and prepare more burial spices? Because Jesus is dead.

You see notice what they don't do. Joseph doesn't take the body down from the cross, feels a pulse, tells everyone to get back and 'give him air' and then rush him off to the emergency room of Jerusalem Hospital, does he? He and Nicodemus wrap the body in a shroud, and put it in a tomb for dead people, and the women go and prepare more spices – because Jesus is dead.

And I want you to see something else here. And that's who's doing all this. You see Nicodemus and Joseph were members of the council. And in his gospel, Luke calls Joseph 'a good and righteous man' (Luke 23:50). And the women didn't come back straightaway because, Luke 23:56, 'on the Sabbath they rested according to the commandment'. In other words, these were law-abiding women. So these aren't revolutionary hotheads, straight out of the backwoods, that we're dealing with, are they? These aren't nutters, sniffing too many aromatic spices. These are good people, trustworthy people, sensible people. They're not liars. And they knew Jesus was dead.

2. Jesus was buried

John 19:41ff, 'Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid… Since the tomb was close at hand, they laid Jesus there.'

Now, in those days, tombs were like small caves, with a large stone rolled across the entrance. And you'd have numerous bodies laid to rest on different ledges in the same tomb.

But John goes out of his way to tell us that there weren't any other bodies in Jesus' tomb. This was a new tomb. So when a body goes missing, and grave

clothes are found, we're not dealing with a case of mistaken identity. There was only one body that could go missing: and it was Jesus.

So Jesus was dead and buried. But think about it. With his death, the hope of his followers died to.

Because…

3. No one was expecting a resurrection
You see the reason people wrapped a body in cloth and spices was to cover up the smell of decomposing flesh. And John tells us that Nicodemus and Joseph using 34kg of the stuff. That's a lot of spice! What's more, it's a lot of money to waste if you think the body is going to come back to life in 3 days time, isn't it? But they didn't.

And when the ladies returned on Sunday morning, Luke tells us that they came back with more spices, to finish off what the men had done in a hurry. But think about that. What were they coming back to do? It was to anoint a corpse. They weren't coming to witness a resurrection, were they? And as we'll see, not even his close disciples were anticipating this. And the reason was that in Jewish thinking there just wasn't any concept of resurrection before the resurrection of everyone on the last day.

And yet, Jesus had been telling his disciples he would be raised from the dead. So why was no-one expecting it? Because everyone knows the dead don't rise! And they'd seen Jesus scourged, they'd seen him crucified, they'd seen him die, they'd seen the spear go through his side. They'd handled his dead body. So no-one was expecting anything.

But when the women got to the tomb that first Easter Sunday morning…

4. The body was missing
John 20:1: 'Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away.' And from the other gospels we know that she and the other women entered the tomb, and discovered Jesus' body gone. So, v2, 'She ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple [that's John]… and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb and we do not know where they have laid him."'

So, the body was in the tomb on Friday. At the request of the chief priests, Pilate had the tomb sealed and a guard posted. And on Sunday morning, the stone is rolled away, the guard has fled and the tomb is empty.

Except it wasn't empty was it? John tells us that when Peter and he ran to the tomb, and went in they saw, v7, 'the linen cloths lying there, and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself' (John 20:7). And don't you just love the eye-witness detail there.
So, why wasn't the body there? And just as importantly, why were the grave clothes *still* there?

Well, think about who could have taken the body. The Jewish religious leaders? Did they make off with it? Well hardly. I mean, when you watch detective films, isn't one of the first things you learn 'motive' – 'think about a motive' the senior guy will say to his sidekick. And what possible motive did they have? And why leave the strips of cloth and give the impression of a resurrection? And if they did have the body, when the disciples turned Jerusalem on its head proclaiming that Jesus had been raised from the dead, why didn't they stick it in a wheelbarrow and push it round the streets of Jerusalem? But they didn't – because they didn't have it.

So, did the Romans take it? But again, for what motive? The very thing the governor wanted to avoid was stoking the fire of religious fanaticism.

Or what about grave robbers? Well, if there were grave robbers about on the Sabbath, why pick the grave of a travelling rabbi who didn't have a denarius on him, whose clothing had been gambled away, and whose grave had an armed Roman guard posted outside it? And having fought through the Roman guard, rolled back the stone, and got into the tomb, would they really have first unwrapped the body and left the linen neatly folded on the ledge, before making off with the naked corpse?

So that only leaves the disciples. Maybe they took the body, and kept it in a cupboard somewhere. But why would they do that for a failed messianic wannabe? Why do that when none of them were expecting a resurrection? Why do that when he had already been given a decent burial by some generous benefactors? And why do that and then go around the Roman world, being martyred, all the time proclaiming: 'we have seen Him alive'? You see, terrorist bombers die for something they think it true. Would the disciples really have given their lives for something they knew to be a lie?

No. Incredible as it seems, the one explanation that fits is that the tomb really was empty and Jesus really did rise again, and that when Mary told the disciples in v18, "I have seen the Lord", she was telling the truth.

And that's the 5th reason you can believe in the resurrection, because…

5. The women were the first witnesses.

Now sadly, ladies, this is not 'you can believe this because women are so much more trustworthy than men'. It's the opposite, because in that culture, women were considered unreliable witnesses whose testimony wasn't admissible in court. And if your case depended on the testimony of women you were on to a loser.

So, just think about that. If the early church made all this resurrection stuff up, why write women into the story as the witnesses? If you want to convince people, pick a couple of upstanding men, pillars in the community as your first witnesses, men like Nicodemus or Joseph, don't pick women.

And yet despite what it might do for their case, all four gospels tell us it was Mary Magdalene, and the women, who saw it first. Now why do they do that? Maybe, just maybe, because it was the truth.

But the 6th and final reason you can believe the resurrection is that the disciples didn't.

6. The disciples were the very first sceptics.
You see when Mary and the other women left the empty tomb and ran to tell the disciples what had happened, Luke tells us that 'these words seemed to them an idle tale, *and they did not believe them*' (Luke 24:11).

And the words Luke uses for 'idle tale' are the words you'd use for someone delirious with a high fever. So the men think the women are talking nonsense: if ever you needed proof of why women can't be witnesses in court this is it.

It's not very flattering, is it? The men who went on to become the first leaders of the church are put on full public display as the very first sceptics.

But why were they so dismissive? Why didn't they hear what the women said about the empty tomb and punch the air, and go, 'yes! It's happened!' Because they know the dead don't rise! These aren't men waiting for the smallest shred of evidence, the faintest glimmer of hope, who'll believe anything they get told. They are as sceptical of reports about empty tombs as any modern person would be.

And yet that disbelief is one of the strongest bits of evidence that all this happened.

Firstly, why make it up? If the gospels were written to persuade others of the disciples' message, why paint them in such a bad light? Because, they're just being honest: 'we didn't believe it either.'

But secondly, something changed. Something happened to turn these men from scepticism to belief; from hiding in their upper room, as John tells us 'the doors being locked… for fear of the Jews' (John 20:19), to being bold proclaimers of the resurrection. Because these same men who refuse to believe the women become so totally persuaded that Jesus was raised from the dead, that they were prepared to preach it, and die for it.

And the only explanation for that is the one John gives: 'On the evening of that day… the doors being locked… Jesus came and stood among them' (John 20:19) - that they saw Jesus alive again in a way that eliminated all their doubt. So, far from the church creating the resurrection, as one commentator puts it (Bock), it's the resurrection that created the church.

But if those are six reasons why you can believe it, what difference does believing it make?

What difference does it make?

Well, firstly it gives you hope when you or your loved ones face death. You see it's possible that Jesus was the first man who had loved Mary Magdalene as a person, and not just used her. And as his death sinks in John says, 'Mary stood weeping outside the tomb' (John 20:11). She is a woman lost in grief, a woman who has lost someone she loved and who loved her. But that all changes, as Jesus calls her name 'Mary'. It all changes as she runs back to tell the others, 'I have seen the Lord.' Everything changes when you have seen the risen Lord. Everything changes when you know that Christ has been raised from the dead, because you know that he is just the first-fruits, as Paul puts it. And we can face cancer and death and dying for ourselves and for those we love, with the knowledge that as God raised Jesus, so one day he will raise us with him.

Secondly, it answers our fears. Look at those disciples, full of fear, hiding behind locked doors. What transforms them into men of courage? The resurrection of Jesus from the dead. And when you hear the risen Lord saying to you, as he said to them, "Peace be with you" (John 20:19), it calms your fears – your fears for the future, your fear of what others might think of you. And it can give you a deep inner confidence, and courage to do what's right, because you know that Christ has defeated your greatest enemy, and whatever you face, you face in the light of his resurrection.

Thirdly, his resurrection is the grounds of our going. Look at what Jesus says to the disciples in that room: "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you" (John 20:21). You see, have you ever wondered why in this church we have Christians from India, or from the Ukraine? Because doubting Thomas, one of the twelve disciples, saw Jesus risen from the dead, saw his pierced hands and feet and side, and believed, and as a result his life was turned upside down, and he preaching the resurrection all the way to India where he was martyred. Because Andrew, one of the twelve, travelled all the way to the Ukraine, preaching the gospel of Jesus' resurrection, and was martyred. It was the fact that these men, and the rest *knew* that Christ was risen that sent them out with the message. And it's knowing that message that will send us out into our world, with the same good news, that our sins have been paid for, that death has been defeated, that Christ has been risen from the dead.

But finally it tells us that Jesus is Lord. Mary came to the disciples and said, "I have seen the Lord." Thomas saw Jesus risen from the dead and said, "my Lord and my God" (John 20:28). As Paul puts it in Romans 1:4, Jesus 'was declared to be the Son of God in power… by his resurrection from the dead.'

And that has profound implications for all of us, doesn't it? It tells us that if Jesus is Lord, we aren't. It tells us that if he is Lord, then he's the one we are to worship and put our trust in. It tells us that if he's the Lord, everything we possess is his, and we are to steward it accordingly.

In other words, everything is different, there is no part of our lives that is untouched by the fact that Christ is risen. Knowing it changes everything.