The Resurrection of Christ
John 20:1-18

I want you to think about your life for a moment. You wake up and what's one of the first things you do, or many of us do? You reach for a device that you can hold in your hand that not only allows you to communicate across the world but gives you access to unprecedented levels of information.

Or think about holidays and travel. Depending on your bank balance, you can hop on a plane and go just about anywhere you want - having researched it all beforehand, on that device of yours. And while you're there, you can post photos of how beautiful it is to make everyone else jealous.

Or think about your health. Diseases that in the past would have been a death sentence can now be cured, and we largely take it for granted.

We live at a time when technology has radically changed all of our lives.

So, let me ask you a question: what are you doing here on a Sunday morning?

Because whether you realise it or not, you're here because Christianity says that 2000 years ago, on the first day of the week, a Sunday, in an age very different from our own, a tomb was found to be empty. And Christianity argues that the fact of that empty tomb, the resurrection of Christ from the dead, can and should shape your life in ways beyond anything technology can.

But if that's to happen, you need to know three things. You need to know that the resurrection of Christ is true, that it's believable, that it really did happen. Secondly, it needs to do more than just satisfy your mind, it has to satisfy your heart, you've got to *experience* it as true - or else it'll have no power in your life. But thirdly, the resurrection has got to give you the resources you need to get through life - and not just for you, but for others.

So, it's got to be rational, it's got to be experiential, and and it's got to be full of hope. And this morning, I want to show you it's all three.

It's Rational
This week the commune put a notice through the door inviting parents to a talk on how to help teach their kids about the disinformation or fake news, that they're going to encounter on line. And what struck me about that is that while people one either side of the political divide can't agree on which side is producing fake news, everyone agrees it matters. That whatever people might say about truth being relative, or us living in a post-truth world, deep down we all know truth matters and live like truth matters. We prosecute airplane manufacturers who make untrue safety claims. We complain if our employer says he's paid us when he hasn't. And if Su told me, 'Darling I've made you a delicious dinner, it's in the kitchen', and I go looking for it, and it's not there because she hasn't, we don't all go, 'well if she thinks she's made dinner, and believes she's made supper, and she identifies as one who's made dinner, that's what matters'. No. We go, 'nope, you're going hungry mate.' We all live based on things being true or untrue.

So, is the resurrection true? Can you be intellectually satisfied that Jesus of Nazareth really did physically rise from the dead, and then build your life on that? Well, look what John tells us.

Firstly, Mary Magdalene and the disciples had ***no expectation*** that this would happen. Across all the gospel accounts, and despite their differences, one of the things that stands out is the total lack of anticipation that Christ would rise. No-one's ever presented as that one faithful person, 'ah deep down Nathaniel always believed it'd happen. Everyone else doubted but not him.' It's the opposite.

John tells us, v1, that 'On the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark.' And the darkness matches her mood. Elsewhere we're told she's come to finish anointing Jesus' dead body. Instead, v1, she 'saw that the stone been taken away from the tomb.' And in response she doesn't leap for joy, thinking, 'Yes! it's happened, I knew it would!' She runs to the disciples and says, v2, "They've taken the Lord out of the tomb". Meaning, someone's taken his dead body.

And when she's alone again at the tomb, v11, 'Mary stood weeping outside the tomb.' Are those tears of joy? No, of grief. Because when the angels ask her, 'Why are you weeping?' she replies, v13, "They have taken away my Lord."

But it's not just Mary. John tells us of his moment of dawning faith in the tomb, but then adds, v9, 'For as yet they [meaning him and Peter] did not understand the Scripture that he must rise from the dead.' In other words, it was only *after* the event that they went back to the Bible and started putting the pieces together. The pieces that told them they could have/should have expected this, but didn't.

Secondly, ***the stone***. In 1930 a British Journalist called Frank Morison decided to write a paper on the resurrection. He doubted its veracity and wanted to prove it was basically unbelievable. But that paper turned into a book describing how, as he studied the gospels, he came to believe it really did happen. It's titled, 'Who Moved the Stone?' And it's the question Mary's confronted with as she arrives at the tomb, but it's the question all of us are confronted with, because no-one - not the Jewish or Roman authorities or the disciples, had any incentive for doing so.

Thirdly, there's ***the race***. Mary runs to Peter and John and tells them about the stone, and John says, v3-4, 'So Peter went out with the other disciple [John], and they were going toward the tomb. Both of them were running together *but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first*.'

Now, in our family, if someone starts recounting something that's happened, or something they were doing when something happened, and it gets all a bit graphic, someone will go, 'thank you! I don't think we needed to know that! TMI!' Too much information. It's not that they're making it up, it's that we didn't need to know all the gory details.

And sure Peter and John's race is not gory, and you're not left going, 'TMI!' But did John really need to tell you he beat Peter to the tomb? No. But he does. Why? Because he's a guy, and it happened, and it's exactly the sort of unnecessary eyewitness detail someone tells you when they're *not* making it up - plus, being a guy, he's going to eat off of this little victory for years to come!

Fourthly, look at ***the burial cloths*** - because that's what Peter and John are doing. In fact, three times, using three different verbs for seeing, John tells us that it was these cloths that had previously been wrapped around Jesus that caught their attention. Verse 5, 'Stooping to look in, he [John] saw the linen cloths lying there but he did not go in.' But Peter, second in the race, did, and v6-7, 'He saw 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.' And then John, winner of the race, went in and, v8, 'he saw and believed.'

And one of the verbs John uses for seeing is the word we get our word for *theorising* from. They're looking at these grave cloths and something about them doesn't make sense, something about them is forcing them to think, to work out, 'what happened here? What explains what we're seeing?' Because it's not just what they're *not* seeing - the *absence* of the body, it's what they *are* seeing - the *presence* of these grave cloths.

What explains their presence in the absence of a body? Because if grave robbers had taken the body, they wouldn't have wasted time unwinding all the cloths and all the spices - not least, because those cloths and spices were valuable and one of the reasons they robbed graves in the first place. Plus, no friend or enemy of Jesus would first strip his body and unwind all the cloths before taking it, because that would have left them carrying round a naked dead body. So why are these cloths still here?

But it's not just their presence, it's their arrangement. John says, v5, 'he saw the linen cloths *lying* there.' It's a verb used for placed, or positioned - not dumped or thrown. And there's the head cloth, v7, 'not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself.' And how they're arranged doesn't make sense. It's not like they've been torn off by a Jesus struggling to get himself free, and they're not lying in a heap. In fact, the word John uses for 'folded' can mean twisted or coiled, so maybe what they're puzzling over is how these cloths are still wound as if still around the body - but the body isn't there. As the English pastor and writer, John Stott says, they're like a chrysalis that a butterfly has escaped from.

And they're stood in that tomb theorising - what explains what we're seeing?

In his book, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, Richard Baukham, Professor of History at Cambridge, says that John 'isn't just an eyewitness, he's a perceptive one.' Because in v8 John tells us, 'he saw *and believed*.' He's seen the stone's rolled away, he's seen the tomb's empty and now he sees these grave cloths lying in place where Jesus' body once was, and the truth begins to dawn on him.

Fifthly, ***the body***. Because there is a body, just not a dead one. And one of the strange things about the resurrection appearances of Jesus is that people don't recognise him - at least, not at first.

Look at Mary. She's standing outside the tomb when she becomes aware of someone behind her. Verse 14, 'She turned around and saw Jesus standing, *but she did not know that it was Jesus*.' Is she just emotional? And she's seen Jesus die and handled his dead body. And her eyes are swollen from crying and her vision blurred by tears. And she's not expecting to see Jesus, so she doesn't? Maybe. Except, neither do the disciples on the road to Emmaus, and they're not crying.

And when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead a few days previously, no one had any trouble recognising him as Lazarus. They took the grave clothes off him, and there was no, 'Is it Lazarus? Or isn't it Lazarus? Boy, I didn't recognise you Lazarus!' It was clearly Lazarus. But with Jesus, each time he has to do something to get people to recognise him - and when he does, they do.

Why would the gospel writers invent that? You see, if they were making this up, and they thought Jesus was a mere man like Lazarus, there wouldn't be any problem with recognition. Just like with Lazarus, it'd be, 'wow, it's Jesus risen from the dead'. Or, if they thought Jesus was some heavenly being, they'd have drawn on Biblical and Jewish literature that describes heavenly beings and he'd be blazing white, tall and powerful - conquerer of death!

In other words, if they were making this up, they wouldn't have a resurrected Jesus who's a normal man… but isn't. Who they don't recognise… but then they do. Unless it happened. Like when you meet an old friend you haven't seen since childhood and, at first, you don't recognise them, but then they say 'hey, it's me, Richard, remember me?' And you don't, but then you do, and you go, 'wow, it really is you!'

And so the gospels are describing that in some way Jesus' resurrection body *was* his body, but it was different, it was transformed; a body that could pass through grave clothes leaving them neatly wound, but at the same time a body that could be touched and held.

Sixthly, you can believe because Mary Magdalene is ***a woman***. And she's the first witness to the resurrection, and you'd never invent that. Not in a culture that refused to accept the testimony of women. Unless she really was.

So, like John, it's as if you're stood in that tomb. The stone's been rolled away. Who moved it? Who won the race, and why do you need to know? There's no body, but there are burial cloths, and look how they're folded. And turn and see Mary failing to recognise but then recognising Jesus. And as yourself, 'what am I going to do with this evidence?'

You see, if you're not yet a Christian, you live every day trusting that some things are true. You can do the same with Christ's resurrection from the dead. And if you're already a Christian, Paul says that to stand firm, the first thing you need to do is put on the belt of truth - because truth holds everything else together. So, if this week you're tempted to doubt, examine the evidence, be fully convinced that Christ has risen, and it will give you incredible confidence.

But it's not just rational…

It's Experiential

And we don't know masses about Mary Magdalene, what we do know is that had Jesus delivered her from seven demons and restored her dignity and calmed her mind. So it's no wonder, as one old bishop put it, that 'she was last at his cross and first at his grave.' And why, when Peter and John leave, Mary stays. As JC Ryle writes, 'love made her linger.'

But love also made her weep. Which is why the angels ask her, v13, "Woman, why are you weeping?"

Doh! Why do you think she's weeping? Jesus is dead and his body's missing and she's grieving!

But that's their point, isn't it? Jesus isn't dead and his body isn't missing, and no one's taken it away, except him.

So they're not asking questions like a counsellor, trying to understand her grief. It's a gentle rebuke, 'er, Mary, why are you weeping on this day of all days? And in this place of all places? The Son of God is risen from the dead. Sin has been conquered. Death has been defeated.'

Years later, John will experience something similar. In exile on the Island of Patmos he sees a vision of heaven opened and he's weeping over his and our unworthiness, until an elder from near God's throne says to him, 'Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered' (Rev 5:5).

Mary is weeping over death. John is weeping over sin. And there is a time for weeping and for grieving. Sin and death are no friends of ours. But all of us need something that can still our tears. Something that can come to us in our grief. And atheistic secularism can never give you that. But the resurrection of Christ can.

Because sensing someone behind her, Mary turns and Jesus repeats the angels' question before adding another, v15, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" And the answer to the second question's as obvious as the first, isn't it? Except, there's a question under the question. What kind of Jesus are you seeking Mary? What kind of Messiah? What kind of Lord? A dead one? One who could save you but not himself? One who could be defeated by his enemies? Who death could hold?

You see, the Jesus Mary was seeking was far too small.

And maybe that's true for you. If you're not yet a Christian maybe the Jesus you're after is the outstanding-teacher-of-life-principles-Jesus. Or the great-moral-example-Jesus.

Or maybe you are a Christian and you do believe Christ rose from the dead, but it's an intellectual belief. You're there rationally, but that truth hasn't settled deep in your heart. You don't *experience* it as true. It doesn't alter the way you see your present or your future. It doesn't shape the way you see temptation or suffering, your wealth or your gifts, the way you deal with your failures or your successes. And above all, you still feel like you've got to earn God's approval.

So see how Jesus treats Mary. She thinks he's the gardener, so, v16, 'Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned and said to him in Aramaic, "Rabboni!"' Just one word: Mary! As one commentator (Milne) writes, 'one word which remade her world' as the Saviour of the World calls her by name.

But notice the order it happens in. She doesn't call him *Teacher* first. She doesn't first have to live up to his great moral example, or apply his ethical demands before earning the right to be accepted by him or experience his love for her. Because if she did, and if we did, we'd spend our lives trying and never arriving, never experiencing, never feeling his love.

Instead, while she's still in her grief and failure to believe, and her looking for a too small Jesus, Jesus comes to her and calls her by name. And when he does, her world is made new.

How can you experience that? Because maybe your heart is aching, or grieving, or maybe you know this stuff intellectually but not in your heart. How can you hear him say your name, and hear him tell you, 'I am risen from the dead and all shall be well.'

Well, look what happens next. And we don't know for sure what happens, except that Jesus says to her, v17, "Do not cling to me." Has she thrown herself on him and is hugging him? Has she thrown herself at his feet and is clinging to his feet? Whatever it is, she's embracing him somehow and trying to hold on to him. She thought she'd lost him forever, but he's alive, and she has no intention of letting him go again.

So Jesus says to her, v17 again, "Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father."

What does he mean by that? I think two things. Firstly, in the New Testament, Jesus' resurrection and his ascension to the right hand of the Father frequently go hand-in-hand. We don't just worship a risen Jesus, but an ascended and reigning Jesus. But his ascension also goes hand-in-hand with his pouring out the Holy Spirit.

So, the first thing Jesus is saying is, 'Mary, don't try and hold on to me. From now on, that's not how you're going to experience me. I'm going to ascend to my Father, and pour out the Spirit, and through the Spirit you will experience a relationship with me beyond anything you've yet experienced.'

And what's true for Mary is true for you. The tomb is empty, Christ is risen and ascended, and through his Spirit you can experience his presence. How can you do that? Number 1, by gathering with the Lord's people, by coming to church every week, because that's where he is in a special way, and before you come be praying 'Lord, I want to meet with you this morning.' Secondly, sing, sing with all your heart, as if you mean it and until you mean it and as you do focus your mind on him. Thirdly, spend time every day meditating on his word, even if it's just for 5 minutes, one verse at a time, asking him to show you things

from his word, and as he does respond to him in prayer and worship, for you and others. Fourthly, when you sense a nudge to contact that person, or pray for that one, or give to that need, do it. And as you do, you'll experience the living, risen Christ speaking to you and working through you.

Because that's the second thing Jesus means: v17-18, "Do not cling to me… *but go to my brothers* and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

Mary, there are other broken men and women who also need to hear that I'm risen - so don't hold on, you've got work to do, you've got a message to share.

Because, thirdly, and finally,

It's Full of Hope

You see, think who Jesus is sending Mary to go tell. Disciples who just a few days before had abandoned him. Men who had promised him their undying loyalty but then denied they knew anything about him. Men who had failed and whose moral cowardice and sin had caught up with them.

But what does Jesus call them? 'No hopers'? No, v17, "My brothers." And his Father is their Father, and his God their God.

How can they possibly deserve that? Answer: They don't. They deserve to be consigned to the trash bin of history. But Christ has paid for their sin, and our sin. And at the cross he's born the judgement we all deserve. And he's been raised from the dead - as Paul says, 'raised for our justification' (Rom 4:25). Raised that we might be declared not guilty. The debt has been paid.

So for them and for us, the resurrection says, there is hope. Hope in our failure. Hope in our sin. Hope in our suffering. Hope in those times when life seems to have come to a dead end. Because the resurrection of Christ is the New Beginning which makes possible all new beginnings.

So, this week, when you find yourself confronted by your failure, or you feel like life has taken you down a road you didn't want to go, preach the resurrection to yourself. Tell yourself, Christ came for people like me, and he is always bringing life out of death.

And, let it change the way you see and treat others. Especially the hurting and the vulnerable. And go to them in the certain hope that God has something far better in store.

And as you do, remember Christ is your elder brother. In 1550, in Reformation Germany, a lutheran Pastor called Erasmus Alberus wrote a catechism for his three year old daughter, Gertrude. He would ask the questions and she would give the answer. Here's how it goes: 'Is Christ your brother?' 'Yes, father.' 'God's only begotten son, the son of the living God, is your brother?' 'Yes, father, really.' 'So you are for sure a great and powerful queen in heaven because Christ in heaven is your brother?' 'That I am, praise God… And he has saved me from the devil's kingdom and given me eternal life.'

You see, when you know intellectually and experientially that Christ is risen from the dead, and that he's your elder brother, that he loves and accepts you and has your back, and his God is your God, and his Father your Father, hope can flood your life and spill over to those around you.