Imagine that you, or someone you love, is facing a life-altering, life-shortening medical condition. But you hear about a new treatment, a single combination pill combining all the medicine, all the supplements, and all the energy you need to get better. And it's not hype. There's clinical trial data, from people with an identical diagnosis to you, telling how this thing has transformed their lives.

You'd at least be interested, wouldn't you?

But what if, instead of treating physical sickness, there was something out there that could answer the deepest needs of your heart? Something so solid it could give you a reason to live when everything else was crumbling. Something that could cause you to love, and not just your friends, but your enemies. Something that could give meaning and value to life, in a world increasingly devoid of meaning and value. Something that could ground you in success while giving you hope in suffering. Something that could tell you why your work was not pointless and why your failures don't define you. Something that can give you so much joy in the highs and hope in the lows of life that at times it feels like your heart is too small to contain it.

And what if that thing, far from being new, had been tested over thousands of years, in the lives of millions of people? Would you be interested in that?

Well, the message of Easter is that the death and resurrection of Jesus is that thing. And when you know, really know, that Jesus of Nazareth died for you, and then physically rose from the dead, it will do all those things and more.

So we're going to look at three things: why you should believe it; what believing it can do for you; and how you should live in the light of it.

Why You Should Believe It

Now somethings in life take some explaining, don't they. But how do you explain the incredible impact Jesus of Nazareth has had on world history? Because 2000 years after his death, millions, if not billions, say they follow him, and history itself is divided as either being before him or after him.

And yet, he had absolutely no resumé to talk of. No degrees, MBAs or Ivy League schools attended - nothing that would make you think, 'this one is destined for greatness.' He never travelled more than a few days walk from home; never courted the endorsement of the rich or powerful, instead he rebuked them. Never made a pitch for political power. Never raised an army, but died, virtually unknown beyond his own small people group. And in an honour/shame culture, his death by crucifixion was so shameful it would have immediately ended any movement gathered around him.

And yet, the number of his followers grew and spread like wild-fire, so that within 300 years they had won the empire that had executed him. That takes some explaining, doesn't it? I mean, something earth shattering must have happened.

And the claim of Christianity is, it did. He rose from the dead.

Now, when you're a junior doctor you have to certify all the deaths that happen in the hospital. And because you spend your day running around, normally the first chance you get to do it is at night. And you go down to the mortuary in the dark, and you're all alone, because everyone else has gone home. And you're faced with rows of large drawers, each one containing a body. And you find the name of the patient you need to identify, and pull open that long drawer. Now imagine if, as you do

that, the patient leaps up and jumps off the trolley. It would make you jump, wouldn't it? But in all the time I had to do it, it never happened!

And if you're not yet a Christian, you might say, 'Exactly! When you're dead, your dead, and to believe otherwise, to believe in the resurrection is silly. And besides, why put so much weight on something that happened 2000 years ago?'

Well, lots of things happened a long time ago, and that doesn't mean they didn't happen.

So did it happen? Did Jesus really rise from the dead, or is believing it just silly? Well, today's reading tells us why you can have real confidence that it did.

Firstly, **no one was expecting it**. Look at v1: 'On the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb, taking the spices they had prepared.'

Why do you think they were going to the tomb? And with spices? Was it to cook a celebratory curry, to celebrate Jesus' triumph over death? No - they're going to wrap his dead body.

And when they find the stone rolled away and his body missing, Luke doesn't tell us that Mary grabbed the others saying, 'Sisters, it's happened!' He tells us, v4, 'they were perplexed about this.' And you're perplexed when something unexpected happens, that you can't explain, that leaves you scratching your head.

And they weren't alone in that. They head back to the city, tell the disciples what they've seen, and Luke tells us, v11, 'these words seemed to them [the disciples] an idle tale, and they did not believe them.' So if you think that talk of someone rising from the dead is silly, the disciples would have agreed with you. They dismiss this as women's talk.

Or look at the two on the road to Emmaus. This stranger comes alongside them and asks, v17, '"What is this conversation that you are holding with each other as you walk?" And they stood still, looking sad.' Why are they sad? Do they regret not putting more money on their bet that Jesus would rise? No, v21, "we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel." We *had* hoped. But those hopes are dashed - because he's dead.

But these guys weren't outliers in thinking like that. In his book, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, NT Wright, professor at Oxford, details how in Greco-Roman thinking it wasn't just that no one was *expecting* a dead man to rise, no one would have *wanted* it. Because to them, the body was something they would be glad to be rid of at death. It was the spirit that mattered. And so the idea of getting it back again, after you'd died, would have been as undesirable as it was unthinkable.

And in Jewish thinking, resurrection was what happened to *all* of God's people, at the end of time, not to *one* person *in* time.

So whether you were pagan or Jewish, it would not have occurred to anyone that a dead man might rise.

Yet something overcomes the disciples' scepticism. And what they say is that it was seeing Jesus alive again. Why believe them?

Because, secondly, **the first witnesses were women.** Look again at v1: 'On the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb.' Who's 'they'? Who gets to the crime scene first? Verse 10, 'It was Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women with them.' Women, to a man! Women in a culture, Greco-roman, or Jewish, that didn't want, or expect, a resurrection, and didn't value the testimony of women in a court of law.

So, if you were inventing the story of the resurrection, to persuade people to believe it, would you write in women as your first witnesses? I mean you could have Joseph of Arimathea, whose tomb Jesus' body was laid in, you could have Clopas and his friend walk to the tomb and not to Emmaus. You could have Peter or John get there first. Why have the women? Maybe because it was true, and they were the first witnesses, and really did find an empty tomb.

Except, it wasn't entirely empty.

Because thirdly, **there were angels but no Jesus.** The women find the stone rolled away, but v3-4, 'when they went in they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were perplexed about this, behold, two men stood by them in dazzling apparel.'

And maybe you think angels are as unbelievable as the resurrection. Why? You see, in terms of the rest of the world, if you don't believe you're probably in a small minority. And could that be because our current western, materialist culture has shaped you to think they *can't* exist, this *cannot* happen.

But ask yourself, what evidence, what assumptions is that based on, and how do you know you're right?

You see, if Luke is making this up, why invent angels? Why have them present but Jesus absent? Why not have the women, or one of the disciples seeing for themselves the moment life returned to Jesus's body? Because that's what the much later gnostic writers do. They have 10 foot tall Jesuses striding forth from the grave in glorious light. But the four original gospels do not.

Why not? Maybe because nobody saw it. Maybe because this is what happened. And they saw angels but no Jesus.

You see, atheistic materialism tells you the universe is a closed system, but on what basis? On the basis that they say it is. But that's circular reasoning. And if Jesus did rise from the dead, then the world is not closed, and the resurrection has opened a door onto another world, a door angels might just walk through.

But fourthly, look at **the grave clothes**. The women tell the disciples what's happened and v12, 'Peter rose and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; and he went home marvelling.'

Why marvelling? Well, the tomb's empty, he's got the women's story going round his head, and there's something about these grave clothes. Because if Jesus body had been stolen by grave robbers, they wouldn't have removed the burial cloths, because getting your hands on the linen was one of the reasons for stealing a body in the first place! And if the authorities had taken the body, they certainly wouldn't have stripped it, because who would want to carry round a naked bloodied, mangled corpse instead of a neatly wrapped one? And why, as John makes clear in his gospel, are the cloths folded and placed, like a chrysalis a butterfly has escaped from?

And Peter's marvelling because he's thinking, surely Jesus can't have walked out?!

But fifthly, **the resurrection appearances** themselves. First, there's Jesus' encounter with the two on the road to Emmaus. Then, as they rush back to tell the others in Jerusalem, Luke tells us, v33-34, 'They found the eleven and those who were with them gathered together, saying, "The Lord has risen indeed and has appeared to Simon!"

And those were just two among multiple. So many in fact that Peter Williams, Principal of Tyndall House at Cambridge University, and a world expert on the gospels as eyewitness testimony, says that it's 'the diversity of [Jesus'] appearances [after his resurrection]: in Judea and Galilee, town and countryside, indoors and outdoors, in morning and evening, by prior appointment and without prior appointment, close and distant, on a hill and by a lake, to groups of men and groups of women, to individuals and groups of up to 500, sitting, standing, walking, eating, always talking' that's so stunning. Because you can't explain them by hallucinations or wish-fulfilment or fabricated stories.

And so while atheistic materialism claims that the resurrection could not have happened, based on its prior assumption that it could *not* have happened, Christianity's claim that it did happen is based on evidence, eyewitness evidence. However earth-shattering the implications of that are.

And remember, all these eyewitness were Jewish. And their first and most foundational belief? 'The Lord our God, the Lord is one.' And yet, within days of Jesus' death they're worshipping him as God - as Thomas meets him and says, 'My Lord, and my God'. And yet, Jesus was their friend. Now, what would have to happen for you to worship one of your friends, or worse, for some of them, your brother, as the God who created everything, as your Maker, and then give your life, for that message?

What must he have been like when he was alive? What would have had to have happened after his death, for them to do that?

In reality, the only thing that can come close to explaining it, is that the tomb *was* empty, the grave clothes *were* folded, and Jesus really did rise from the dead.

What Believing It Can Do For You

Look at v6, as the angels say to the women, "He is not here, but has risen." And the 19th Century Scottish minister and poet, Horatius Bonar, wrote, 'This is the only place of which it could be considered good news to say, Christ is *not* here.' You see, at every other time, it was good news that Jesus *was* present and bad news if he wasn't. It was good news for the disciples when he was present in a storm at sea; good news for a man blind from birth when Jesus passed by, good news for a bleeding woman when he was so close she could reach out and touch him; good news for Jarius when Jesus entered his home and raised his dead daughter; good news for Lazarus and his sisters when they could say, Jesus is here. And good news for a bereaved and mourning mother when Jesus approached her only son's funeral procession.

In every case, it's Jesus' *presence* that's good news, not his absence. But standing at the tomb, with dawn breaking, there is no greater news than to hear 'he is not here!'

And not just for the women.

Look again at v34, as the disciples tell their friends, “The Lord has risen indeed, and has appeared *to Simon*!” Why Simon? Because Simon had failed and denied three times he knew anything about Jesus. And he was broken by the realisation of what he was really like; that he was a man who could betray his closest friend. And yet Jesus, risen from the dead, comes to him. And it’s as if to say, Simon Peter, your failure will not have the last word, my victory over sin and death has the last word.

And what’s true for Simon can be true for you. You see, maybe you look at your life and see the mess you’ve made, and how you’ve let yourself or your loved ones down. But commentators have long recognised that when Luke tells us that all this happened, v1, ‘On the first day of the week, at early dawn’ it’s not just the start of a new week, or even a new day, it’s that the resurrection announces a new age, a new creation, a new dawn. That the resurrection of Jesus begins to make everything new.

And that means that like Peter, your past does not need to define you. It’s what Christ has done that defines you. That as the rays of sunshine began to creep over the garden that first Easter Sunday morning, so the light of his victory can shine into your heart and turn even the darkest of corners golden.

But it’s not just that your failures don’t define you - the resurrection tells you your guilt is taken from you.

Look at v35 - as the two on the road to Emmaus recount how ‘[Jesus] was known to them in the breaking of the bread.’ How come? Did they see the nail marks in his hands as he broke the bread? Maybe. Or maybe they finally saw something else. You see at the Last Supper, Jesus broke bread and said, ‘take, eat, this is my body, broken for you’. And maybe the penny dropped, and their eyes were finally opened, that it’s in the breaking of his body on the cross that they and we are made whole, and our sin is paid for. It’s in his rising from the dead, that we live. And if his resurrection tells you, ‘your failure does not define you’, it also tells you, ‘your guilt shall not be your burden’. That when death lost it’s grip on Jesus, guilt lost its grip on you.

Or think about the pointlessness of life. Damien Hirst, the British artist and atheist, once asked ‘Why do I feel important when I’m not?… I am going to die and [yet] I want to live forever, I can’t escape that fact, and I can’t let go of that desire.’ In other words, he’s having to confront the cold implications of his atheism. That in a world without God, there’s no ultimate meaning to life and death is the end. And yet, he can’t shake the feeling that his life *is* significant, that he *wants* to live forever and does *not* want death to be the end. But his atheism has no explanation or answer for those feelings and desires.

But the resurrection of Jesus tells us, ‘that’s because it’s not true’. Because if Jesus has been raised, death is not the end, and Hirst’s life and your life do have eternal significance. And so what makes more sense of our deepest desires? That this life is all there is or that the tomb is empty, and Christ is risen?

Or think about your work, and the hours you spend at it. You want that work to mean something, don’t you? To count. But if there is no God, there’s no point to *life*, let alone your *work*. But what if Christ has been raised? Then there is a life to come; there is final judgement; and so, suddenly, everything is filled with meaning. As Paul writes at the end of 1 Corinthians 15, a chapter given over to the evidence and implications of Christ’s resurrection,‘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*' (v58). Because if Christ has been raised, no effort for good, or sacrifice for others, is wasted.

Or think about your sense of worth, or worthlessness. In a society that looked down on women, God chose women to be the first witnesses. And that tells you God values those society says are of no value. Like an expert handed a piece of art that everyone else thinks is worthless, God the Father sees and knows your true worth. And it's not based on your looks, or your performance, but him. So if you feel worthless, the fact that 'he is not here, he is risen' was first told to women, tells you, whoever you are, in God's eyes you are of inestimable value.

But ultimately, 'he is not here' is good news because it tells you that on the field of battle, your greatest enemy, death itself, has been defeated. GK Chesterton wrote, 'Jesus didn't come into the world to make bad people good, he came to make dead people live.' And every other religious teacher or self-help guru tells you, 'this is how to live life.' Only Jesus said, 'I am the Life.' The Resurrection and the Life. And that means that as death approaches, you do not need to fear. As Paul writes, 'Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep' (1 Cor 15:20). Which means, his resurrection is just the beginning.

So, if all that is true, what should you do now?

How to Live From Now On

Now, did you notice the similarities between what the angels say at the tomb, and what Jesus says on the road? Firstly the angels: v5-7, 'As they [the women] were frightened and bowed their faces to the ground, the men said to them, "Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. *Remember how he told you*… that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise."'

'Don't you remember him telling you this would happen? Did you forget his words? You bow before us in fear, but where we come from, we bow before him in awe and adoration! And his words have infinite power! And have you forgotten them?'

Or Jesus on the road: v25-27, "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all 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.'* In other words, 'guys, if you'd only remembered, and believed, all that God has said in his word, none of this would have shaken you.'

So let God's word be what forms you. If you're not yet a Christian, think about doing what Peter does. He runs to the tomb to investigate for himself what's happened. Now, you can't do that, but you can pick up the Bible and read and study one of the gospels, and look at the life, and listen to the words, and examine the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus, and investigate for yourself why it was that his friends came to worship him as God.

And for the rest of us, read and listen to his word daily. Immerse yourself in it. Let it shape how you see your sorrows and your success. Let it shape how you see yourself and the world around you. Let it be what grounds you when life is great, and when it is grim. Because as you do it will multiply your joy when life is happy, and give you hope when it is hard. Christ is risen, so trust his word. Christ is risen, he is risen indeed.