Why do you Seek the Living among the Dead?
Easter Sunday
Luke 24:1-12 and Ephesians 1:15-2:10

Easter Sunday is the most important day in the Christian calendar for a reason, and it's the obvious one. Every year it tells us: The impossible and the unthinkable happened. Christ was physically raised from the dead.

As Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians 15, '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, *[and] that he was raised on the third day, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.*' (15:3-5)

In other words, this event that left the women who first discovered the empty tomb confused, or as Luke puts in in our first reading, 'They were perplexed about this' (Luke 24:4). And which the men, when the women tell them, dismiss as v11, 'an idle tale' becomes for those same men and women a simple historical fact. So simple Paul uses just one Greek word to explain it, three in English, 'he was raised' (1 Cor 15:4). It's as if he's echoing the words of the angels to the women at the tomb, 'He is not here, *but has risen'* (Luke 24:6)

And the disciples had seen Jesus die. And like the women they had seen the empty tomb, in fact, Luke tells us 'Peter rose and ran to the tomb' (Luke 24:12). What he doesn't tell us is what John tells us, that it was a race, a race that John lets us know he won. And they had seen him alive again. And they could name themselves and hundreds of others as witnesses to that fact. A fact that to them was indisputable.

I mean, why else would they, as Jewish men and women, start worshipping a man as God, or change their day of worship from the Sabbath to the Sunday and call it the Lord's Day? Or be willing to give their lives saying, 'you can kill me if you want, but it still happened.' Something must have happened, mustn't it?

It did, Paul says, He was raised.

And yet, it's got to be more than a simple historical fact hasn't it, if you're to bother with it. There's got to be a 'so what?' to it, hasn't there? I mean July 4th remembers a historical event, but if you're not American do you celebrate it? Or August 1st and Swiss National Day also remembers a historical event, but should the people of Kazakstan celebrate it?

And so if you're not yet a Christian you could legitimately say, 'ok so a man rose from the dead 2000 years ago - amazing - so what?' Is it anything more than history?

And the New Testament says, oh it is so much more.

Honour in Place of Shame
Because when it comes to the resurrection, there is a 'so what?' for Jesus, isn't there? Listen to the angels speaking to the women, v6-7: "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."

And that title *Son of Man* was the one Jesus used more than any other for himself. And he got it from Daniel 7, as Daniel saw one like a son of man approaching God, the Ancient of Days, and being given dominion and power and glory, that all peoples and nations should serve him. But that's

a million miles from what happened at Jesus' trial where he was mocked and spat upon. Where he was stripped naked and publicly shamed. Before being crucified as a fraud, as someone who claimed to be this great king, the Son of Man, the Messiah, but was nothing of the sort.

But he was, the angels say to the women. And God proved it by raising him from the dead. As Paul writes in Romans 1: 'He was declared to be the Son of God in power… by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord' (Rom 1:4).

And so if you're not yet a Christian, every Easter is like a yearly reminder, dropping in your inbox, pinging in your agenda, asking you: who is this man, Jesus of Nazareth? And what will you do with him?

Because if he has been raised from the dead, and if he is the king over every king, if he is *the* Son of God and *the* Son of Man, whom everyone must worship, there are going to be some implications for us, aren't there?

And it's some of those implications that, in Ephesians chapter 1, Paul is praying that people he's writing to would see and know. Verses 16–20, 'I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is t*he hope to which he has called you*, what are t*he riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints*, and what is *the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe*, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead.'

Hope. Riches. Power. Christ's tomb stands empty Paul says, and because of that fact God's promises and purposes toward you are anything but empty. Instead, imagine a mountain dam, holding back a vast reservoir of water, but it's wall is breached, and a torrent begins to pour down into the valley. So, when the stone was rolled away from the tomb that first Easter Sunday morning, and Christ walked out, it was as if a hole had been punched in the wall separating you from all the blessings of God.

And Paul is saying, because Jesus was raised from the dead, those blessing have begun to flow. And in Ephesians chapter 2, he wants you to get a taste of them.

Life in Place of Death

Now maybe you've seen it in a film or documentary, but apparently, in US prisons, when a prisoner on death row was lead from his cell to make his final walk to the execution chamber, the prison guards would call out 'Dead man walking.'

And before you became a Christian, Paul says, that was you: v1-2: 'You were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked…'

You stood condemned. The sentence passed. All hope was gone. Cut off from God and unable to save yourself. You were a dead man walking. And not just walking but burdened, under the weight of your sin.

Or imagine a corpse in a mortuary. Can that corpse sense the love of those who have gathered around the body and are weeping? No. Does it feel the touch of a loved one who reaches out their hand? No. They're dead. And lying in the mortuary of sin, we too were senseless to the love and touch of God, Paul is saying.

But does God leave us there? No. Verses 4-5: 'But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ - by grace you have been saved - and raised us up with him.'

Because do you remember the first words the angels said to the women at the tomb? "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" (Luke 24:5). And now, Paul is saying, what was true for Christ is true for you in him. It's the riches of God's mercy. Because it's not just Christ's death you have been joined to, it's his resurrection.

Because at the cross, in his death, Christ bore our trespasses and sins, and he was condemned for us. And united with him in his death we are forgiven. But he was also raised, Paul says. As the angels said, 'he is not here!' and in him you were raised.

So, picture a patient being rushed to Emergency in the back of an ambulance. But en route he suffers a cardiac arrest, but the doctors and nurses are waiting. And he's rushed from the ambulance to the resuscitation room. But he's not breathing and his heart has stopped, and he is minutes, maybe only seconds away from death. So the team begins the protocol. And defibrillator shock is followed by CPR and defibrillator shock, and it seems all hope is gone, until shock number 3, and the trace comes back, and his pulse returns and he will live.

Is that what Christ has done for you? No, Paul is saying, it is infinitely better. You weren't on the verge of being certified dead, you were dead. Spiritually, you were like Jesus, three days stone cold dead. And like him you were lying in the tomb of life, cold and stony white. But then he called your name and your motionless chest began to move, and that cold and ashen white skin began to turn pink. And your eyes begin to open. And you, who once were dead, live.

That's what Christ's resurrection has done for you, Paul says. You were dead to God and dead to his love. But out of his great love for you, he raised Christ from the dead, and as you believe in him, like a plug in a socket, that same resurrection power begins its work in you.

In CS Lewis' book, T*he Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the White Witch turns all those who defy her into stone. And under her rule it is always winter but never Christmas. But then Aslan the Lion returns and he unstones all her victims and they return to life. And the snow begins to melt and the trees begin to bud, because Aslan is on the move and Spring has come. And that is what Christ has done for us, Paul says. We too were dead as stone - not because we'd chosen the right, but the wrong. But when Christ walked out of the tomb, it was like the first day of spring, and the un-stoning of hearts could begin, because Christ is on the move.

Great but what does that mean, practically?

Freedom in Place of Domination

Look again at v1-3: ‘You were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience - among whom we all once lived.’

So before we become a Christian, it’s not just that we’re dead, it’s that we’re followers. Followers of the course of this world, and followers of the prince of the power of the air.

Which is ironic, isn’t it? Because today, at least in the West, we value our freedom, and independence, and resent anyone telling us what to do, don’t we? But Paul’s saying, yes but outside of Christ, you’re not really free. You’re a follower. Even as you put your personal freedom and your refusal to be tied down at top of your priorities, you’re a follower. Firstly, of the course of the world. Because isn’t you wanting to live your life unconstrained by others just a product of our current culture? Or when you were young, you told yourself you were a rebel, in the music you listened to, in the clothes you wore, but weren’t you just following the latest trend, and bending to the latest fad. And we can be so keen on having others’ approval it’s almost as though they control us.

But not just the world, but the prince of the power of the air. Now, even if you’re not yet a Christian, aren’t there times when you look at the world and wonder at the power of evil at work in the world? That there’s something more at play than just people’s individual choices. That there’s some kind of dark superpower at work in the world, that’s intentional. It’s why across cultures people have recognised a reality of evil that’s beyond warped human psychology, but that’s supra-human and intelligent and directed toward destruction.

The problem, says Paul, is that alienated from God and cut off from his goodness, we find ourselves under the power of just such a dark prince. And maybe you’re not religious, but don’t you sometimes feel like that pull, that temptation, to do something you know to be wrong, seems to come from *outside* you. That it *is* a temptation, And that you can be lead astray - as if a power outside you *was* leading you astray. And has there ever been a time when it’s almost like you hear a voice - an accusing voice, and it’s not your conscience which is clean and direct and specific, like ‘you should not have done that’. This other voice is much darker and unspecific and condemning, ‘you’re no good, you’re useless, look at you, who do you think you are?’

And the problem is, Paul says, we find ourselves falling for the temptation, and being led astray, and we listen to the voice. And when we do, we’re being followers, Paul says, following the prince of the power of the air.

But what if the true king returned? What if he went into battle and vanquished that dark prince? He has Paul says, because if that first Easter Sunday vindicated Jesus as Christ the Lord, then he walked out of that tomb as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. And he has called time on the power of the prince. Because united with Christ in his resurrection, v6, God has ‘raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.’

Which means, you’ve been set free from following the world and the controlling power of other people’s approval of you, and you’ve been delivered from the dominion of darkness. Because raised with Christ it’s as if you are already reigning with him. And that means that instead if living as a son of disobedience, as Paul puts it, you’re free to start living lives of obedience.

Because fourthly….

Purpose in Place of Passions
You see, did you notice what marks our lives before God intervenes? Verse 3, 'Among whom we all once lived in *the passions* of our flesh, carrying out *the desires* of the body and the mind.' Passions and desires. The things, even good things, we want too much, and the things we just must have. The things that can become the driving force in our lives… like ambition, which is not wrong, but becomes twisted when we sacrifice things we should not sacrifice for something else that one day we will discover fails to deliver. Or, we want sex and sacrifice the slow burn of true loving relationships to get it. We want money, but in pursuing it sacrifice true wealth. We want experiences and adventure and travel because we think that's life, but in pursuing them we sacrifice the rootedness and belongingness that gives true depth to life.

But that is what we *were,* Paul is saying. But Christ has been raised from the dead, and we have been raised with him. Which means a new start is possible. The tomb of wrong desires or over-desires can be left behind. And instead, we can live with a sense of purpose. Verse 10: 'for we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

Which means, you don't need to drift from one thing to the next, trying to follow your heart. But neither do you need to feel stuck, wondering, 'is my job of any value? Does anything I do actually matter?' But if you had asked that of the angels at the tomb they would reply, 'o everything matters! Because Christ has been raised!' Life and death matter. Integrity and honour matter. Words and work matter. Family and friends and loyalty and witness and courage… it all matters. Because in 1 Corinthians 15, having set out the historical fact of Christ's resurrection, Paul says, '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.' (1 Cor 15:58).

Because if Christ has been raised from the dead, life is not a matter of meaningless chance, and you are not just an animal living by instinct and passion and desire. If you're a Christian and have put your faith in him, you have been created - raised to new life - for good works, works he already has lined up for you. So you can live with purpose.

And, finally…

Hope in Place of Despair
Verse 3 again, we 'were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.' We were by nature dead men walking, stumbling down the corridor of life to our inevitable death and the judgment beyond. Or, to invert the angels' words, we were the dead among the living dead.

Until God broke in through Christ. And look at the superlatives: v4, 'But God, being *rich* in mercy, because of the *great* love with which he loved us', v5, 'Made us alive together with Christ', v7, 'So that in the coming ages he might show the *immeasurable* riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.'

So death is not the end, and wrath is not awaiting you. As Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, 'For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ' (1 Thess 5:9).

Because at the cross Jesus has already taken all of God's wrath for us. And in him, God has something very different in store for you.

I mean, if the riches of God's grace and kindness to you in Jesus - which Paul talks about here - could be wrapped up in a gift box and given to you, how big would that gift box be? What would be it's dimensions? Listen, you couldn't measure it, Paul is saying. It would have to be immeasurably vast, because the riches of his grace in kindness to you in Christ are immeasurable, and he intends to take all eternity to show them to you.

So… do you ever look at your life, or your sin, and despair? Do the lies of the prince of darkness ever find their mark and you feel worthless? Or do you just have an honest and sober assessment of yourself and you know you don't deserve anything from God? Whichever of those is true for you, God has got something far better in store, Paul is saying.

Because when the stone of Christ's tomb was rolled away it was like the stone blocking the way to the vast, limitless treasury of God's kindness being rolled away. That's what and you will never exhaust it, Paul says.

So, that first Easter Sunday vindicated Jesus. He always was and always will be who he said he was. But it also tells you that, if you're a Christian, if you're trusting him, if you're united to him by faith, your spiritual death has been reversed, you have been raised to life in him. And you can live in freedom, with purpose, and in hope.