The Resurrection: An idle tale?
Luke 23:50-24:12

So, we've made it to the last chapter of Luke's gospel. And wherever you are on the scale of Christian belief, if you don't know it already, you probably should, and that is that the physical resurrection of Jesus from the dead – which is what this last chapter is all about - is foundational to the Christian faith.

The apostle Paul wrote, 'Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved… for 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' (1 Cor 15:1-4). That's the good news we're standing on, Paul says: Jesus died, he was buried and on the third day he was raised from the dead.

In fact, it's so foundational that Paul says, if Jesus hasn't been raised we Christians are totally stuffed – that's a Martin Slack paraphrase. Here are Paul's own words - 'If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain… your faith is futile… we are of all people most to be pitied' (1 Cor 15 14, 17, 19). In other words, the Christian faith calls us to something so counter-cultural, it calls us to such a radical costly way of life – that if this is all make believe – if this really is flying spaghetti monster stuff – we are of all people most to be pitied.

And yet, the testimony of all four gospels, and the rest of the New Testament, is that for all its gob-smacking nature, running counter to everything we know about life and death – Jesus was physically, bodily raised from the dead.

So, if this is so crucial to the faith, but so counter to what we know of death – I want us to look at this passage this morning and ask two questions. 1. How can you know the resurrection happened? And 2. Why does it matter that it happened?

How can you know it happened?

1. Jesus was dead
In the opening chapter of his famous book, A Christmas Carol, Charles Dickens wonderfully labours the point that Jacob Marley was dead. It's the very first sentence of the book: 'Marley was dead.' A few paragraphs later he writes, 'You will therefore permit me to repeat, emphatically, that Marley was as dead as a door-nail.' And finally, he says, '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 as Jesus' crucifixion ends, Luke has something similar in mind. He wants us to know that Jesus was unequivocally dead. In the words of Dickens, this must be distinctly understood, or nothing wonderful can come of the story. The crowd who have watched Jesus die disperse, and then Luke tells us in v50 and 52 that 'A man named Joseph, from the Jewish town of Arimathea… went to Pilate and asked for *the body* of Jesus.' A scourged, beaten, crucified, dead body.

And Joseph takes the body from the cross and he wraps it in a shroud, and puts it in a tomb. And the women who had followed Jesus followed Joseph, and saw where the tomb was and, with the Sabbath fast approaching, went home to prepare the spices so they could come back and anoint the body after the Sabbath. Now why do they do what they do? Why does Joseph wrap the body in a shroud, and put it in a tomb? Why do the ladies go and prepare the spices and anointments? Because Jesus is dead. Joseph doesn't take him down from the cross and start saying, 'give him air, give him air'; he doesn't rush him into the emergency room of Jerusalem Hospital, because there are faint signs of life. He wraps the body in a shroud, and puts it in a tomb, and the women go and prepare the burial spices – because Jesus is dead.

And in telling us all that Luke adds another little detail – he provides us with character statements for Joseph and the ladies. He tells us, v50, that Joseph was 'a member of the council, a good and righteous man.' He tells us that the women were law-abiding people: v56, 'on the Sabbath they rested according to the commandment.' These aren't revolutionary hotheads, these aren't nutters, they haven't come out of the woods, they've not been 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

v53, 'Then [Joseph] took [the body] down and wrapped it in a linen shroud and laid him in a tomb, cut in stone, where no one had ever yet been laid.'

Now, in those days, tombs were like small caves cut into the rock face, and within each cave a number of ledges were cut, so there might be numerous bodies of family members laid to rest in the same tomb, all in varying stages of decomposition. And a large stone was rolled across the entrance of the tomb.

Luke tells us that Jesus' body was buried in just such a tomb. And he makes the point of telling us that there weren't any other bodies in the tomb. So when a body goes missing, and grave clothes are found, we're not dealing with a case of mistaken identity. Jesus' body was the only one. And v55, 'the women… saw the tomb and how his body was laid.' So, no mistaken identity and no mistake on which tomb it was.

So Luke wants us to know that Jesus was dead and buried. And if you can get into the mindset of the disciples at this point, you'll know that it's not just Jesus body that's dead and buried, all the hopes the disciples had in and for Jesus are dead and buried with Him.

Because…

3. No one was expecting a resurrection

None of them, not Joseph, not the women, not the disciples, none of them were expecting or anticipating anything. In his gospel, John tells us that Joseph was helped to prepare Jesus' body by another secret disciple called Nicodemus. And Jewish practice was to wrap the body in strips of linen cloth and spices to cover

up the smell of rotting flesh as the body decomposed. And John tells us that Nicodemus and Joseph did so using about 34kg of spices. That's a lot of spice and a lot of money to waste if you think the body is going to come back to life in 3 days time. But they didn't, did they?

And when the ladies return on Sunday morning, Luke tells us, v1, 'they went to the tomb, taking the spices they had prepared.' They want to finish off what Nicodemus and Joseph did in a hurry. But can you see – they are coming to anoint a corpse, not witness a resurrection.

But why when Jesus had told them He would be raised from the dead does no-one seem to be expecting it? Why is everyone caught so off-guard? Because everyone knows the dead don't rise! Death means death. And they'd seen Jesus die. They'd handled his dead body. I mean even doctors, especially doctors like Luke who's writing this, know the dead don't rise. For a Jew, resurrection wasn't something that was going to happen in the here and now, resurrection would happen on the last day, at the end of the world, when all the righteous of Israel would be raised.

So Jesus was dead, and buried, and no-one was expecting anything. But when the women got to the tomb on that first Easter Sunday morning…

4. The body was missing

V1-3: 'On the first day of the week [Sunday], at early dawn' – literally, at *deep* dawn. What a picture! The deep darkness of the night of grief and death is just about to be broken by the dawn of life – 'they went to the tomb… and they found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in they did not find the body.' Now, the other gospels tell us that as the women were making the way to the tomb they were worrying about how they were going to move the stone away from the doorway, because those stones were heavy. But when they got there – they discovered it had already been moved. And in a nice little play on words Luke says, they *found* the stone moved, but they didn't *find* the body.

So, the body was in the tomb on Friday. Matthew tells us that 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.

Well, almost empty. The strips of linen cloth used to wrap the body, were there.

But why wasn't the body there? And listen, you can't just dismiss it all with a wave of the hand like some New Atheist, with an 'it-doesn't-matter' mentality. It absolutely matters – everything hinges on this. Was Jesus raised from the dead, or did someone else remove the body?

Well, who are the suspects? Could it have been the Religious leaders – the chief priests and scribes? Did they make off with the body? Hardly. They had zero motive to do so. And why leave the strips of cloth and give the impression of a resurrection when that was precisely what they wanted to avoid. And if they had the body, when a few weeks later the disciples started turning Jerusalem on its

head proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus, all they had to do was put the body in a wheelbarrow and start wheeling it round the streets of Jerusalem. But they don't – because they don't know where it is.

Well, did the Romans remove it? Again, ask yourself, what motive did they have to do so, when the very thing the governor wanted to avoid was a riot and stoking the fire of religious fanaticism?

So, did grave robbers take the body? But 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, the one grave with an armed Roman guard posted outside? 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 clothes neatly folded on the ledge, before making off with the naked corpse?

So our last suspects are the disciples. Maybe they took the body, and kept it in a cupboard somewhere. And now we really are in the land of make-believe. 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, one after another of them being beheaded and crucified upside down and martyred, all the time proclaiming: we have seen Him alive? Why would any of them be tortured and die for something they knew to be a lie?

No – the one explanation that fits, incredible as it seems, is the one given by the two men in dazzling clothes, who ask the women, v5, "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" You're looking for Jesus, right? Well, this is a tomb! And tombs are for dead people. So, what are you doing here?

V6, "He is not here, but has risen."

And these two angels have to spell it out to the ladies, reminding them that Jesus had said all this would happen. "Remember how he told you…" We struggle, don't we, to accept the things we don't understand and to understand the things we don't want to accept. And the angels gently rebuke the women and it's a rebuke that is good for us as well – not just over the resurrection, but any area where the word of God challenges us: remember who spoke the words – remember who makes the promise – remember who it is who calls you to act. You can build your life on the words of God, you can trust them because they are His words and you can trust Him.

5. There is no attempt to describe it.

On the face of it, it is the glaring omission in all four Gospels. None of them have an account of how the resurrection actually happened. There's no mention, no description of the moment when Jesus actually came back to life and shrugged off the grave clothes. So how can you believe something when you don't even know how it happened? Well, ask yourself, why don't the gospels make any

attempt to describe what actually happened? Because the much later, 'fake' gospels, do. Why don't the real ones? And the answer is, that no-one saw it, and the gospel writers like Luke are presenting to us eyewitness testimony, and so there is no attempt to fake it. There's no, 'and the tomb was filled with light, and his eyes opened and his left toe began to twitch.' They just don't go there. So far from the absence of any description being a stumbling block to faith, the fact they don't go there but only tell us what the eyewitnesses saw – means you can trust them.

But the 6th reason you can believe in the resurrection is because…

6. The women are the first witnesses.
V9: 'And returning from the tomb [the women] told all these things to the eleven and to all the rest.'

Now, don't get this wrong! It's not 'you can believe this because women are so much more trustworthy than men'. It's the opposite: in that culture and at that time, women were considered unreliable witnesses and their testimony wasn't admissible in court. And if your case depended on the testimony of women you were on to a loser. So, here's the question: if the early church made all this resurrection stuff up, if they invented this, why write women into the story as the witnesses. That's like committing testimonial suicide. If you want to convince people pick two upstanding men, pillars in the community like Nicodemus or Joseph, don't pick women.

But all four gospels tell it as it was, like it or lump it, whatever it does for our case, the women saw it first, and we're sticking to the story, because it's the truth. And ladies, a brief aside: The fact is that God did chose women, at least 5 of them, to be the first to proclaim the resurrection. So don't swallow the line that the Bible is repressive or anti-women.

But the 7th and final reason why you can believe the resurrection from this passage is that the disciples didn't believe.

7. The disciples are the very first skeptics.
The women leave the empty tomb and run back to the disciples gathered somewhere in Jerusalem, who are no doubt keeping a low profile in fear of the authorities. But when the women tell them what had happened, Luke tells us v11, that 'these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.'

And the words Luke uses for 'idle tale' are the words you'd use for someone who's delirious with a high fever. The men think the women are talking nonsense. They're crazy. 'This is all just a grief reaction. Sit down and get a grip, woman. Someone give them a cup of tea. I mean boys, if ever we 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 skeptics.

But why do they react like that? Why so dismissive? Because they know the dead don't rise! Not like this anyway. These aren't men waiting for the smallest shred of evidence, the faintest glimmer of hope, who believe anything they get told and then they're off around the globe preaching the gospel. They are as sophisticated and as skeptical of stories about angels and the dead being raised as any modern person would be.

And yet that disbelief, that skepticism is one of the strongest bits of evidence that these events happened. For two reasons:

Firstly, why make it up? If these gospels were written to persuade others of the disciples' message and their authority in proclaiming it, why deliberately paint them in such a bad light? Wouldn't they rather present them as the epitome, the paradigm of faith? But they don't and frankly, it all smacks of simple honesty: 'we didn't believe it either.'

But secondly, something changed. Something must have happened to turn these men from skepticism to belief; from hiding in their upper room to be bold proclaimers of the resurrection. Because these same men who refuse to believe the women and think they're nutters, become so totally persuaded, so sold out for the message, so convinced of the truth that Jesus was raised from the dead, that they were prepared to preach it, and be tortured and to die for preaching it.

And the only explanation for that is that they saw Jesus alive again in a way that eliminated all their doubt. Any doubt they had was forever removed when they encountered the risen Jesus for themselves – as we'll see later in the chapter. So, far from the church creating the resurrection, as one commentator puts it (Bock), it's the resurrection that created the church.

And we see Peter take his first tentative steps to faith, in v12: 'But Peter rose and ran to the tomb.' You see, Peter has learnt the hard way. He has learnt from hard, personal experience that when Jesus says something He means it. He had refused to listen to Jesus' warning about his own personal failure, and he had seen the result of that. And so now, when the women come back and remind them of Jesus' words, something stirs in Peter and he runs to the tomb and finds it just as the women said, and v12, 'he went home marveling at what had happened.' He's beginning to weigh the evidence.

But if those are seven reasons why we can believe it, and we've not even got to the actual appearances –those come next time - Luke also drops a hint as to why this matters so much.

Why does it matter that it happened?
Of the whole host of reasons the Bible gives as to why the resurrection matters, Luke alludes to one:

Simply put if Jesus was raised from the dead, then Jesus is Lord. Did you notice in v3 how Luke subtly shifts to calling Jesus, '… the Lord Jesus…'? And the reason he

does that is because ultimately the resurrection tells us what *God* thinks of Jesus. You see, in our post-modern world you can have your view of Jesus and I can have mine and we can pretend it doesn't matter what we think just so long as we all get along. But frankly, it doesn't matter what you think, or I think, what matters is what God thinks. And when the angels tell the women, v6, 'he is not here, but has risen' they use the passive tense of risen: Jesus has been raised. But He didn't do it Himself, this was done to Him, *God* has raised Jesus from the dead. Which means God has put His stamp of approval on Jesus. So everything He ever claimed to be, the Way and the Truth and the Life, Messiah, Son of God, King of the Jews and of every nation, the one who is able to save dying sinners like the thief on the cross or you and me and welcome us into His kingdom, everything he said about Himself, God says 'yes' to, by raising Him from the dead: 'This is the Lord'. As Paul puts it in Romans 1:4, He 'was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead.'

And that doesn't just have implications for these first disciples – it has profound implications for every one of us. It tells us that if Jesus is Lord, and King, then we aren't. Instead, everyone of us must surrender to His rule and reign in our lives. It tells us that if He is the Lord, then He is the one we are to worship – the one who is to have the pre-eminent place in our hearts and lives and affections. It tells us that if He's the Lord, then everything we possess is His and He has entrusted it to us as His servants and we must steward it accordingly. It tells us that if He is the Lord, then as Peter says in Acts 4 – there is no other name by which we must be saved, and that should spur us to missions – to pray and give and go so that others might hear the news. And finally, it tells us that if Jesus is Lord – Caesar isn't. We've kind of lost the revolutionary implications of that statement – but when the New Testament writers started saying Jesus is Lord the clear implication was '…and Caesar isn't.' And neither is Obama or Cameron or Merkel or Hollande, or whoever takes their place. And as our western societies follow their current trajectories and it becomes harder to be a Christian, the resurrection is the supreme reminder of where our first allegiance lies. Jesus is Lord – no one else.

So, when it comes to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, you can believe it without wavering, and paraphrasing Paul, the resurrection is the gospel – it is the good news, the solid ground on which you can stand.