Your Redeemer Lives
1 Cor 15:12-20

Well, without a doubt, right at the heart of the Christian faith is the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Which means that at the centre of Christianity there isn't just a claim that Christ's disciples were inspired by his great teaching; or moved by his fine example; or overcome by some mystical sense of his ongoing presence after his death, but the clear, stark claim that Jesus had been physically, bodily raised from the dead. It's the foundation stone of the Christian faith.

And that's a bit awkward, isn't it, because everyone knows the dead don't rise.

Now, as I doctor, I've seen plenty of dead bodies. I've told you this story before but when I was a junior doctor I worked for 6 months in Care for the Elderly Medicine. And when you work in elderly medicine you get to see and certify a lot of deaths. And the mortuary of the hospital I worked at was set apart from the rest of the hospital. It was round the back, hidden away in a little coppice wood. And the only time I could go there to certify a death, was at the end of my shift, when it was dark and the mortuary staff had left. And I'd have to walk that path through the trees, in the dark, with my heart in my mouth, and any sound and my hair – what I had – would be on end. And I would open the door to the mortuary, and try and prop it open, so I wasn't locked inside. And having fumbled for the light switch, I'd have to locate the right patient, and take back the shroud and with my heart thumping away in my ears try and listen with my stethoscope and to make sure there was no heart beat.

Now, if any of those bodies I had gone to certify started moving I would have been scared out of my wits. But you know what? They never did. Because the dead are dead, aren't they.

Now, occasionally you get these stories about people who survive after resuscitation, when all the doctors have given up hope and then someone notices they have a heart-beat, but in those cases we're talking a matter of minutes. With Jesus we are talking of a man who had been scourged with a Roman whip to within an inch of his life, executed by crucifixion on a Roman cross, whose lungs and heart were kebabed by a Roman spear to prove death had happened, a man who was confirmed dead by his executioners, and whose dead, mangled body was taken to a cold stone tomb and left for 3 days with a great rock rolled across the entrance to the tomb. And the Christian faith is built upon the claim that that man was physically raised from the dead, not that he staggered bleeding and broken from the tomb, but that he appeared again in such a way that his disciples, who to a man refused to believe it when the women first told them it had happened, spent the rest of their lives proclaiming this Jesus as the resurrection and the life.

And that's a bit awkward, isn't it, because we all know the dead don't rise. When you're dead, you're dead. I recently had a bit of a philosophical debate with Simeon and we were trying to define what life was. What does it mean to be 'alive'? And Sim's definition was 'it's not being dead.' Which was really profound. The kind of thing you'd expect from an Australian. But whilst that's never going to win the Nobel Prize for philosophy, he's got a point. Life is life and death is death and once you've crossed the line there's no coming back.

And so when it comes to this foundation stone of the Christian faith, it's not surprising that some people say, 'o come on, we don't believe that kind of thing nowadays. Look, those guys were primitive and uneducated and superstitious and they fell for stuff like that in those days, but we know better, we're more sophisticated than that.' And they either dismiss the Christian faith out of hand, or they try and have a kind of Christianity but without the embarrassing bits, a kind of resurrection-free Christianity: we'll have the community and the justice bits, and the love and the good for families stuff, but let's forget the miraculous, let's forget the resurrection.

But you know what's interesting? That criticism is not new. The argument that this can't be true because the dead aren't raised is nothing new. And any suggestion that these first Christians were living in some kind of gullible age when people fell for this sort of thing, and they'd be just as likely to believe in pink unicorns at the end of the garden, is, frankly, groundless. Because it's exactly that criticism that Paul is dealing with here in first century Corinth.

Look at v12: 'Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?' And what seems to have been happening at Corinth was that there was a group of people who, whilst they may not have been denying Jesus' resurrection out of hand, were arguing against resurrection and future resurrection in general. It didn't fit with their world-view, they thought that was all a bit primitive.

And in response Paul makes it clear that the resurrection of Christ is the non-negotiable of the Christian faith. V13-14: 'But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain.' And he goes on to say in v19: 'If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.'

Look he's saying, the resurrection is so central to the faith that if you try and remove it we are of all people most to be pitied. No sense of 'look we can have a Christianity without this' but 'if this isn't true, if Christ hasn't been raised we as Christians are to be pitied.' Now, why is that? Why should we deserve people's pity if Christ has not been raised?

I've got 4 points this morning: It's all or nothing; what you believe matters; paying the ransom and it's the fact that counts.

It's all or nothing

v14 again, 'If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain.' So the first reason we're to be pitied if Christ hasn't been raised is, to put it bluntly, we're wasting our lives. If Christianity is built on this foundation stone of Christ's resurrection, but he hasn't been raised – Paul's wasting his time preaching that Jesus has been raised, and they're wasting their time listening to him. And I'm wasting my time standing here Sunday by Sunday and you're wasting yours

coming. If Christ hasn't been raised we might as well go and do something better with our time.

But more than just wasting our time, this life Paul was living and some of these guys he's writing to were living, the life Jesus calls all of us to live, is costly. It involves dying to our own desires, giving away our resources, loving others who we may not want to love, laying our lives down in service to others, looking and sounding like fools to many, all in the belief that Christ has been raised and our reward lies up ahead.

Now, if Christ has not been raised from the dead – if this is all so much make belief, then not only are we wasting our time, we're wasting our lives, and we've only got one of them.

But what if he has been raised from the dead? What if the message at the heart of Christianity is true, that as the creed says of Jesus, 'he was crucified under Pontius Pilate, died and was buried but on the third day he rose to life', what if that message is true? Then, rather than being the most pitiable of people, isn't any cost or any loss we might suffer, or any sacrifices we might make for Christ worth it? If Christ has been raised, and all that implies about him, rather than it being foolish to give your life and your stuff for him, wouldn't it be foolish not to? If He has been raised doesn't that make Him of infinitely greater value and greater worth than anything or anyone else?

Now, if Christ has not been raised, then Paul's right isn't he? – the Christian faith means nothing and should cost you nothing. But if Christ has been raised, then doesn't He rightly deserve our all? You see, when it comes to the resurrection, it really is all or nothing.

What You Believe Matters

V14-15 again, 'If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ.'

So the second reason Paul gives that we are of all people most to be pitied if Christ has not been raised is that we have believed something about God that is false. Our faith is in vain. Later on in v17 he says its futile.

Now of course in our day, people are happy to get along with each other and their different constructs on God. You can believe what you want to believe and I can believe what I want to believe and everyone is happy, because there is no such thing as absolute truth. Which, as has been pointed out is a self-defeating argument. The claim that there is no such thing as absolute truth is itself a claim to truth – it's either true or it isn't. And when it comes to God, either he does exist in reality or he doesn't, the atheist and the theist can't both be right; and when it comes to the resurrection either Jesus was raised from the dead or he wasn't. You can't have me saying, 'Jesus was raised from the dead' and someone over here saying 'no he wasn't' and then someone else saying well I think you're both right.

And Paul is saying, 'look, whether or not Christ has been raised has profound implications for faith'. If God has not raised Christ then it has profound implications for the Christian faith. Basically, it's built on a lie – on a claim that God did something, which God didn't do if he didn't raise Christ.

But the profound implications run both ways, don't they? You see if there are profound implications for Christians if Christ has not been raised, there are just as profound implications if Christ has been raised, and not just for Christians, but for everyone of us.

You see, you can passionately believe that you are right in what you believe. You can be totally committed to and persuaded by your faith; you can hold it with deep sincerity, what ever that faith is, whether it's atheism or humanism or Buddhism or Christianity or whatever, but if it's wrong, it's wrong. There's an old illustration that says you can be convinced that your car has enough petrol to get you to where you want to go, but if you're wrong, it doesn't matter how sincerely you believed it, you're stuffed, and you're walking.

So, it doesn't matter how sincere your faith is, what matters is, is it true? And Paul is saying, look if this resurrection stuff is not true, we Christians are to be pitied more than anyone else. But, what if it is true, what if God really has raised from the dead the man who claimed in John 14:6, 'I am the way, and the truth and the life and no one comes to the Father except through me'? Because, if he has, then that has very real implications for everyone of us, whatever you currently believe about Jesus.

But Paul gives one last reason for saying that the resurrection matters: v17, 'If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.'

Paying the Ransom

One day two of Jesus' disciples, James and John asked him a favour – they wanted the positions of honour, to sit on Jesus' right and left, when his kingdom was finally established. And all the other disciples heard that they got all huffy and indignant, almost certainly because the two brothers had beaten them to it. But Jesus responded by saying, Mark 10:43-5, 'Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.'

I don't know if you saw in the news last week, the case of the Australian man who had been held captive by an Al Qaeda offshoot in the Philippines. Well, he was finally released from captivity, looking half-starved, because his wife had gathered all their savings and sold all their possessions so that she could pay the ransom for his release.

And that's exactly the language Jesus was using there with his disciples. That he would give his life as a ransom for many. And it's a very specific word – a word that was coined precisely for the price that had to be paid for setting someone

free; free from slavery or free from prison. A ransom: the price to secure freedom.

And Jesus was saying, I will give my life as your ransom, I will give my life so you get to go free.

But that begs the question, free from what? If Jesus is saying his death will be him paying our ransom to free us from slavery or from prison, that kind of implies we're slaves or prisoners. Well, thank you very much, Jesus, but I'm neither.

Well, interestingly, the Bible says we are both. It says that we are both slaves to, and held captive by, sin. And it doesn't mean by that that we are always doing bad things. It's worse than that.

You see, if it was just that we were messing up every now and then we could stop it, clean up our act and do better. Instead, what it tells us, and if we're honest, what you and I know by experience, is that we just have this inbuilt propensity, this innate drive to be self-centered, to see the universe as being centered about me, that despite the world being full of billions of others, despite the universe being as immense as it is, we tend to think of ourselves as being at the centre of it all and that everything really should revolve around me. And in thinking like that and living like that, we elevate ourselves to the position of God and we dethrone Him.

But there's another way our dilemma works out, because it doesn't have to be with that kind of rampant individualism. Jesus said the greatest commandment was to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. And none of us would be so foolish as to claim we had done that. Instead we tend to seek our security or sense of worth or meaning in career, or money, or sex or relationships or family, or whatever, and these things become our God – they have our heart ad our lives, and we even make sacrifices to them. Often they are good things but they've become ultimate things and the end result is that God is dethroned in our lives and these other things take his place.

And so we find ourselves trapped. Trapped both *in* our sin - we try and change but find ourselves powerless to do so, or we do manage to change, but get overtaken by our pride because now we think we're so much better than others. But also trapped *by* our sin: we face the consequences of a life lived apart from and in opposition to God.

And so we need someone to free us, someone to pay the ransom. And the reason Christ died on the cross was to do just that. That out of his love for us, at the cross he took upon himself all the curse of God's law against our sin, and became the ransom for our freedom.

And you might think, great, but what's that got to do with resurrection? Surely Christ could die in our place, give his life as our ransom without any need for invoking a physical, bodily, resurrection. I mean doesn't a dead saviour work just

as well? – the point is the ransom has been paid, hasn't it? I mean what's wrong with a dead saviour, with religious leader? Everyone else has got one: Buddha, Muhammed, Gandhi, Darwin, Nietzsche, they're all dead. So why does Paul say, v17, 'if Christ has not been raised… you are still in your sins'?

You see, if Christ had not been raised we would not have a clue as to whether that ransom payment was sufficient or not. We would not have a clue whether God's justice had been satisfied or not. We wouldn't have a clue whether we should choose Christ or Buddha or Nietzsche to save us. We'd still be languishing in our sin.

But, what if Christ has been raised from the dead? What if God has powerfully demonstrated that your ransom has been paid, by raising Jesus? What if Christ has paid it for you and given his life to set you free? Then it's not just Jesus' tomb that's empty this easter Sunday morning, it's your prison cell as well. It's not just his grave clothes that get left behind but all the guilt and the shame and the penalty of our sin, because he has paid our ransom.

Well, is this all conjecture for Paul? Does he leave us with 'well, if Jesus has been raised it's great, but if he hasn't we're stuffed, and you've just go to hope you make the right choice.' And the answer of course is no: v19-20: 'If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead.'

It's the fact that matters

There simply was no doubt in Paul's mind: Christ had been raised. And he doesn't say that based on wishful religious thinking, he bases it on eyewitness evidence. Listen to what he writes just before this passage we're looking at: 1 Cor 15:3-8: '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, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas [that's Peter], then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.'

So far from this being wishful thinking he can provide a list of eyewitnesses – and he's one of them, who they could go and interview, who to a man were the original skeptics, who refused to believe in the resurrection themselves, who were the very first unbelievers, until they encountered Jesus risen from the dead for themselves. These weren't men just waiting to believe the latest fairy tale that came along. Just like any modern they knew the dead don't rise, until their world and their whole world-view was turned upside down that first Easter Sunday morning.

But do you notice who Paul leaves out of that list? There's no mention of the women who were the first witnesses on the scene of the resurrection. You see, Paul knows that the testimony of a woman in those days was inadmissible as evidence in court. If your case depended on the word of a woman, sorry ladies,

but your case was sunk before it even left harbor. Which is what makes all four gospel accounts of the resurrection so startling – because every one of them has the women, Mary Magdelene and her friends, as the very first witnesses of the resurrection. And no-one in their right minds would have made that up. If this was all make believe and the gospel writers were guilty of a collective flight of fancy, they would never have written the women in to the story - they would have put in some upstanding pillar of society – a man like Joseph of Arimathea or Nicodemus, because both of them would have done the trick nicely. But they don't. The gospel writers tell us the women saw it first and all the men disbelieved. Why do they tell it that way? Because that's what happened - it's the truth and the only explanation that can account for the profound change of heart and mind and lives of these men – to the point of giving their lives proclaiming the message that Christ has been raised from the dead is that Christ has indeed been raised from the dead.

So, the resurrection of Christ is not just a line in the creed which we can take or leave. It means everything, and it tells us that any cost you may pay, or any sacrifice you may make, or any opposition you may face for Jesus is worth it – because Christ has been raised. It tells us that though you and I face a pantheon of choices – to follow this religion or that spiritual guide, there really is no competition, nothing and no-one else can or should come close to claiming our allegiance or our love, because Christ has been raised. And finally it tells us that we can live free from the guilt and the shame and the slavery of sin, because Christ has paid our ransom with his own life and God has raised him from the dead.