

I will not believe it

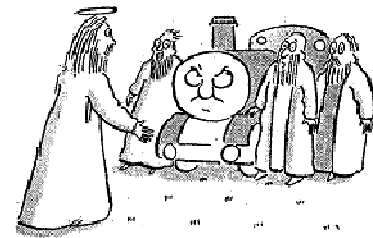
John 20:19-31

Today we gather with members of the Heart Foundation and with those whose lives are afflicted with or bereaved by heart disease. We do so seeking comfort and hope in the face of human frailty and death.

It is a particularly appropriate day to have a reading in which the recently risen Jesus repeatedly saying to his disciples "Peace be with you." As they heard those comforting words they would have remembered that just a few days earlier he had spoken of leaving his peace with them and that despite present trouble they could take heart for he had overcome the world. (John 16:33)

This sense of comfort, peace and victory, this taking heart is something that I am sure we all would want to have and it is what Jesus offers. But both then and now this only makes any sense *if* Jesus has indeed risen from the dead.

But such belief is hard, as we see in the disciple forever known as Doubting Thomas, but I wonder if that is the best name for him. I think Thomas the realist is a far better if less catchy title (see John 11:16, 14:5). Think about it, what would you have said if it was you that happened to be out of the room and when you come back in everyone tells you that the man you know died 3 days ago has just walked in. I think I along with Thomas would have said "I will not believe it." If we are going to believe such a thing we would want some proof.



Doubting Thomas

As the Christian faith, and the peace, comfort and joy it brings, stands or falls on the reality of the resurrection I thought it would be helpful to consider what support there is for such a belief to give health food for thought to any doubters or realists like Thomas, and so that we can all take heart.

THE STRANGENESS OF CHRISTIAN BELIEF

I want to start by pointing out something rather strange about Christian belief, something with which we are so familiar that we may not have noticed how unusual it is.

THE DEATH OF OUR LEADER IS A GOOD THING

Christianity is founded on a person who died. The death of Jesus at the hands of the Romans in Jerusalem around 30AD is one of the best attested facts of the ancient world, with references by Jewish, Roman and Christian writers of the time. After a 3 year ministry of some of the most revolutionary religious and moral teaching ever heard, and attracting some followers, Jesus was publicly and humiliatingly crucified.

So far this is not surprising, everyone dies. But now for the surprising part, Christianity teaches that this was a good thing. Christianity clearly teaches that it was a wonderful thing that Jesus died, it was to be celebrated and it was of first importance that tell people that Jesus died and was buried. (1 Corinthians 15:3). This is very strange

Perhaps I can illustrate the oddness of this best with a musical example. Consider Jimi Hendrix, not something you may have done at the Cathedral before. In a 4 year career from 1970 he revolutionised electric guitar playing and became extremely popular, influenced many and then died an embarrassing death from a

drug over dose. Now people will want to remember Jimi, share his music, marvel at his talents, and celebrate his life, but no one says that his death was a good thing.

Yet this is exactly what Christianity said about its founder, the death of our leader was a wonderful thing. We celebrate not only his life, but also his death.

BELIEVED VERY EARLY

When did Christians start to think like this? Was this something that grew up over hundreds of years after Jesus allowing all sorts of myths and legends to grow around this revolutionary preacher? Whilst this is a commonly held idea it simply doesn't fit the facts of history.

Paul, the great early Christian missionary wrote a number of letters and one, Galatians historians can date with some certainty at about 50AD, or one year either side. This letter speaks of how Paul's public preaching focused on that Christ was crucified (Galatians 3:1). This is less than 20 years after Jesus death.

But we can go further back than that. Paul as an incidental part of his letter tells his readers what he has been doing for the past 17 years or so. And 17 years ago he had been persecuting Christians in Jerusalem, those who believed then what he believed now.

This means around 33AD within just a few short years, perhaps even a few months of Jesus death we have people in Jerusalem, where Jesus was crucified, who believe that the death of the leader of their movement was a good thing. Furthermore they believed it enough to be persecuted and even killed for it.

This strange belief about the death of Jesus is right at the very heart and the very start of Christianity. At this point we are not talking religion or theology, just history and we must find an historical answer which makes sense.

How are we to explain this strange belief, for it is very odd unless something equally strange caused it? Well Paul is quite clear, Jesus died was buried and "was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:4, NIV).

Belief in the resurrection at this early stage of the Christian church is the only explanation that could cause these people to believe that the death of their leader was a good thing. With the resurrection Jesus' death wasn't the end but there is a triumph over death, the sins for which he said he died were dealt, God had kept his promises and could be trusted for the future.

Anyone who wishes to deny the resurrection has another historical problem of coming up with a different plausible explanation for this strange belief and the joyous rise of the early church.

WHY THEY BELIEVED IT

So the early church believed in the physical resurrection of Jesus. He had not just died and gone to heaven, he was not a ghost, but he had gone through death and triumphed over it never to die again. But what evidence do we have that they were correct in that belief?

EMPTY TOMB

The first piece of evidence is the empty tomb. As has been well said Christianity could not have got off the ground if Jesus was still in the ground.

I think that we can be sure as a fact of history that the tomb of Jesus was empty. All the early arguments about the resurrection between Christians and the Jews were not trying to show that the tomb was empty but giving reasons why it was empty. As Peter says in the book of Acts everyone in Jerusalem knew what had happened.

Jesus wasn't dead

One explanation that is that Jesus didn't actually died on the cross. Interestingly this is only a relatively new idea, first appearing in the 18th Century. It

could only have come about when people were far enough removed from seeing crucifixions to not know what they were like.

The idea that a man who had been whipped and crucified who would have needed extensive medical treatment could have, 48 hours later, got himself out of the grave clothes, rolled away the stone, overpowered the guards at the tomb and then managed to convince his disciples that he was now the risen Lord is truly unbelievable. As a side issue it would also mean that the greatest moral teacher the world had ever known was a liar.

The Romans knew what they were doing. Jesus was dead.

Jewish Leaders or Romans stole the body

Perhaps someone stole the body, the Jewish Leaders or the Roman officials. Leaving aside the fact that there is no reason why they would do this surely they would have produced the body when the rumours started of Jesus resurrection but they never did because they didn't have it.

The Disciples stole the body.

So did the disciples take the body? This would mean that a rather dysfunctional group stole the body of Jesus, made up a story of the resurrection, proclaimed this for the next 30 years making no financial or any other gain out of it, in fact they were persecuted, with probably 10 of the remaining 11 being killed precisely because of their teaching that Jesus was risen from the dead. It just doesn't make sense and I will not believe it.

Chuck Colson was a powerful member of the Nixon administration at the time of the Watergate Scandal for which he was sent to jail where he became a Christian. He was impressed by the consistency of the disciples to the resurrection for he knew first hand that the truth has a way of slipping out. He says:

"We couldn't hold our stories together for three weeks under that pressure, I was around the most powerful men in the world, but we couldn't hold the lie. If the resurrection wasn't true those disciples could never have held out. Someone would have dug out the tape or something."

RESURRECTION APPEARANCES

If all we had was the empty tomb then it would still be guess work as to what happened but there also the accounts of Jesus appearing to people, such as those that we heard in our Bible reading this today. Jesus first appeared to woman, unlikely to be a made up details in a culture where women could not appear in court. Peter and the other disciples were witnesses, and Paul speaks of another 500, with the implication of go and ask them if you don't believe me.

DO YOU BELIEVE IT?

Now we should not assume that because the gospels were written almost 2000 years ago that people were simply naive. The account of Thomas shows that people then as now didn't just believe what they were told. Furthermore there has been extensive research that shows that whilst people understood what resurrection was, a dead body coming back to life, Jews believed it would only happen at the end of the time and that Gentiles didn't believe it would happen at all. This explains why as Paul says to preach the resurrection was a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.

But as people looked at the evidence they made their decision, and people still do. There was a brilliant young British lawyer in the early 1930's who researched a book attacking the raising of Christ using the same critical criteria he would use in the courtroom. But to his surprise as he did so he found rather than undermining the resurrection he found himself believing it. Frank Morrison's classic book *Who Moved the Stone* is subtitled "The Book that refused to be written" as against his will the evidence changed his mind.

He has joined many others who have come to believe that Jesus not only was raised but that he lives now and have had their lives revolutionised by him. Each Christian is a contemporary proof of the resurrection.

For when we accept the resurrection we cannot stay the same. As Thomas come face to face with the reality of the risen Lord he says "My Lord and my God." Can we say any less? I believe it is because to affirm the resurrection means such a life changing declaration that many continue to say "I will not believe it". It becomes a way to avoid reality rather than dealing with it. It is a problem with their hearts rather than with the evidence.

But in accepting the resurrection we know that forgiveness is won, reconciliation with God granted, confidence in his love and good purposes for our world restored and hope of life beyond the grave, the eternal life in Jesus name which the passage promises.

Here is comfort in grief, hope in trial, love eternal.

It is from this sure ground that we can hear Jesus say

"Peace"

and

"Take heart".

Its such good news that I almost can't believe it, but it is true, thank God.

*Richard Humphrey
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