

Resurrection & Reality

Luke 24:1-12

Imagine the scene, put yourself in the room with the eleven disciples and the others. All your hopes lie dead with Jesus in his tomb. The women who had gone to tend his lifeless body in which they had seen him laid rush back saying that messengers from God had told them that Jesus had risen, he was alive, everything was happening as Jesus had said it would.

Imagine the looks on the peoples faces. What do you expect to see? From what we are told in our passage from Luke's gospel their reaction was not one of joy, not even surprise, just unbelief, they thought their words were an idle tale (v11)..Other translations have "nonsense" or "just stupid useless talk". I imagine that our natural response might be "Get real".

When we say "Get real" what we are really saying is "what you have just said does not correspond to what I perceive as reality, so I suggest you alter your statement." That is rather a mouthful, which is why we say "Get real" instead, but that is what we mean.

The resurrection is certainly news that challenges our view of reality.

The Reality of the Resurrection

One common way to deal with this is to redefine what happened so that the event fits our perception of reality. We need then to consider briefly what the resurrection claim is.

The narratives of the resurrection are not spiritual stories. They do not say that Jesus died and went to be with God in heaven and so is still alive in some spiritual sense. If the women had come back with a message like that then there would have been no disagreement from anybody, they would have all sadly taken some comfort from it, but they would not have responded with unbelief. Linguistically it should be noted that the word "resurrection" was never used to describe such a belief of died and went to heaven. Nor would such a faith have been able to cause the explosion of confidence, joy and love that followed the first Easter once the truth of the resurrection hit home.

The story of the resurrection has to do with a body, both absent and later present. The stories are quite specific. Those who saw Jesus laid in the tomb returned to the same tomb and there was no body there.

When Jesus then appears to his disciples he is quite clear that he is not some apparition, he shows them his hands bearing the nail marks, he invites them to touch him, he eats in front of them. The resurrection was a physical, bodily event. Jesus if I can stretch the point "got real". Make no bones about it Christianity could not have got off the ground if Jesus was still in the ground.

The question of reality.

This brings us back to the question of reality and the challenge of the resurrection. The title I have chosen for this sermon, "Resurrection and Reality", is an ambiguous one. It could be taken to mean that the two things are opposed, there is

resurrection and then there is reality and we have to choose between the two. Or alternatively it could mean a joining of the two, resurrection adjusting our reality.

I would suggest that in that distinction we come to the heart of the matter at Easter. Either we hear these stories as idle tales, meaningless talk, and say "Get real" and make Easter to be about chocolate, eating fish and few days off.

Or we believe that they are real historical events and then the tables are turned and the resurrection tells us to "Get real" about God, Jesus and eternity.

I am fully convinced of the historicity of the resurrection and will not argue for it now, although I would be happy to make a time to discuss it with you. Rather I will assume as you are gathered here on Easter morning then you are happy to affirm that

Christ is Risen

He is risen indeed.

What I would like to consider all too briefly is the shape of reality once the resurrection is accepted, the view of the world that the message of Easter Sunday, an empty tomb, a risen Saviour, opens up for us, which the New Testament captured and the early Christians lived out.

CAUTION: CREATOR AT WORK

Road Signs

We have probably all being travelling down a highway when we see repeated signs saying "Caution: Men at Work", or words to that effect. And yet so often you don't see anybody doing anything, maybe a few more signs, a few trailers and witches hats, but no men doing anything. There is only the promise of road work but little more.

As you read through the Old Testament you see that God is working out a plan, and there are many occasions where God promises that he is going to act to save his people, Israel, and in so doing reveal himself as the true king and solve the problem of injustice and evil in this world. Signs if you like that God was going to be at work on the road ahead. At the time of Jesus God's people were still awaiting the fulfilment of these promises.

The resurrection is that surprising moment when you come round the corner and discover that there are actually work men at work. The early Christians when faced with the incontrovertible truth of the resurrection came to realise that in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus all that God had promised he would do was coming true.

What does this say about Reality

This means that the resurrection is not simply an event, a strange but true event, along the lines of "if you bury enough people chances are one will pop up eventually". It is not God showing his power in a one-off fashion, rather it is an unveiling of God's answer to the problems of the world just as he has always promised. In the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, God has taken on the powers of evil, all the powers of oppression and tyranny, even the power of death and triumphed and in the resurrection we see the start, the foretaste, of God's new creation.

The resurrection calls us to "get real" about the true creator God who rules in power, in justice and in love.

It calls us to "get real" about Jesus, the resurrected Lord, vindicated as the one who came from God, show us what God is like and what it means to be truly human

It calls us to "get real" about his death by which he redeemed God's people.

This is resurrection reality. This is the reality which undergirds the confidence of the apostolic preaching and the New Testament and on which Christianity is based.

Understanding the resurrection like that means that it cannot be considered as a pebble thrown into the lake of history creating a few ripples. Rather the resurrection a meteor striking the earth sending shock waves in all directions. If we do not think these thing through we will be treating it as an idle tale.

RESURRECTION OF HOPE

Don't be afraid

I once asked a high school scripture class what the most repeated command in the Bible is. After quite a silence, one asked "Is the first word 'don't'?"

That is the view that many have of God, that he is the killjoy in the sky, who issues a number of seemingly random commands all of which could be summarised by "don't", designed to stop us doing what we otherwise would want to do.

Well the surprising thing is that the most common command does involve "don't" but not in the way we expect. The command is don't be afraid, don't be afraid.

When we see the resurrection as the declaration of God working in history, as the declaration that he is in charge we start to see the reasons for obeying this strange command.

View of God

Firstly we have a different view of God, he is not some distant out there figure, rather he is the creator God who is active and rules in this world for salvation, who in Jesus is revealed as a loving Father who deeply cares for his people.

Forgiveness of Sins

Furthermore in God's plan of salvation the death of Jesus pays the full price for our sin and in his resurrection shows that there is no more to pay. For those that repent and believe in Jesus our sins, those things that separate us from God and each other are dealt with. Our relationship with this God is secure.

New Creation

Lastly we see that God's love is one that is literally death defying. We are set free from the fear of death rather we look forward to a new creation, a new heavens and a new earth. The resurrection looks forward to when all will be put right.

Fear turns to hope

The resurrection gives good ground to not be afraid. But this reality where fear can turn to sure hope is very different from the one in which most of us operate. We can easily live in fear, fear of failure, of singleness, of commitment, of unemployment, of retirement, of growing old, and finally fear of death. The truth of Easter is to turn from these fears to the God who can raise the dead.

We can easily live without hope. The dreams that we had in our youth have ebbed away as the potential has been replaced by the all too mundane actual in a world that seems depressing and meaningless. The truth of Easter is to turn in hope to the God who can raise the dead.

We need to get real about what the resurrection means and let it soak deep into our troubled hearts.

I do not mean to say this is easy, or that it is instant solution but we need to hear again "don't be afraid" in the very core of our being. God can be trusted even with our deepest hurts, our deepest fears, our deepest failures because he is the God who raises the dead.

Here is the source of joy, delight and vibrancy that the first Christians experienced and that flows through the New Testament

ALIVE TO GOD

Finally the resurrection calls us to "get real" about the way we live our lives. The message of the resurrection is that this world matters. The very physical nature of the resurrection points to Christianity being more than a spiritual pension plan for

your ultimate retirement; it is not something that just makes us feel better. It is about living out the truth, the reality that the resurrection proclaims, that the creator God is the true ruler of this world. As Paul puts it we are to be alive to God in Christ Jesus.

As we are set free from fear, as we live a life founded on the sure hope of God's promises, then we are able to treat each other as God intended. We are set free to love in the face of hardship, we are set free to practice true generosity and service knowing that a life given to God can in no sense be lost.

This is what the early Church did, so much so that Athanasius a third century bishop could use the way that Christians loved each other as a proof of the resurrection. Their self-giving behaviour only made sense if the resurrection was true. Here is a call for us to "get real" in the way we live as those who believe in the resurrection.

CONCLUSION

This then is the reality that the resurrection confronts us with. A reality where God is king, where fear is replaced by hope, where we are called to live in the real world.

Imagine that you are again with the disciples and the others, faced not with the report of others, but the resurrected Jesus. Feel the fear and hopelessness melt away to be replaced with a new reality of joy, of peace, of hope, of contentment, of truth.

An idle tale? Get real.