

## Matthew 27:62-28:20

### Risen and Victorious

#### Notes from a Sermon Preached at Christ Church Liverpool

“Where there’s life there’s hope”, the saying goes. Although in the face of some tragedies it has a ring of cliché about it, largely that’s true isn’t it?

The diagnosis of cancer still holds out the hope of medical or miracle cure. But once you’re dead nobody talks about those things any more. The businessman who has lost everything still has a chance of making another fortune. I’ve met more than one who has done just that. But if he succumbs to despair and kills himself it’s the end of all his dreams and those of his family. The frostbitten explorer still has hope as long as he can stagger down the mountain or across the frozen Arctic. But his stiff body offers no such optimism to those who find it.

“Where there’s life, there’s hope.” It’s a statement that really brings together two things. Two different elements. Two different kinds of question.

**A question of proof.** Firstly there’s an evidential element. Something to do with the way in which we experience the world. We say “where there’s life there’s hope” because, in our experience, death marks the end of hope. Death is universally permanent and final. Let me put it another way for you. All the evidence from throughout the world seems to be absolutely rock solid conclusive that dead people don’t rise. It just doesn’t happen does it? Poor people do get rich sometimes. Really sick people do get better. Really unpleasant people do change. But dead people, and indeed dead anything, don’t rise. There is an evidential element to “where there’s life, there’s hope.” Because we know that where there is no life, there is no hope.

**A question of life.** But there is another thing going on here too. There is also what you might call an existential element. Something to do with the way we feel that the world ought to be. Something about what we think life is all about. “Where there’s life there’s hope” suggests, doesn’t it, that hope ought to be normal. That wanting everything to get better rather than worse is what human beings are wired for. Which is slightly strange. Because our experience is that as people get older the general progression of health, fitness, mental sharpness, energy levels and everything else is not upwards but distinctly downwards! And even if you broaden things out to families, cities and societies it’s not at all clear is it, that things getting better

and better is by any means universal or even normal.

These, then, are the two problems of death. There is an existential issue, a question of life. A great problem that death defeats all our hopes and dreams. That it undermines everything we long and work for. That it destroys and obliterates. And there is an evidential issue, a question of proof. Death is universal. It strikes every person. It is irreversible, permanent and total. Money cannot buy your way out of it. Healthy diets and plenty of exercise can only delay it by a few short years.

And then, into the mix come the claims of Christians about Jesus Christ. Claims that he has managed to defeat death. That he has been resurrected. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is right at the heart of Christian belief. So much so that the Bible can say that without a belief in the resurrection Christianity is totally worthless.

But the resurrection is very often seriously misunderstood. So this morning we’re going to take a look at Matthew’s account of it and see how he draws together the two threads of the problem of death – the question of proof and the question of life – and shows that they are both addressed by the events of the first Easter day.

#### **1 The question of proof: We can believe in resurrection because Matthew addresses our scepticism.**

People have, perhaps inevitably given the outrageousness of the claim Christians make about Jesus’ resurrection, come up with other possible explanations for what could have happened on that Sunday morning.

Most of the time, in my experience, these ideas are presented as if they are amazing new insights that can suddenly be expected to destroy the Christian faith.

But what is striking when you read Matthew’s account in these verses is that by the time he wrote his gospel down just a few years after the events, the objections had already been thought of and Christians had already answered them. And this, remember, was at a time when you could still go and ask most of the people who were actually there, both those who believed and those who

didn't, for their version of events. So if what Matthew wrote was wrong it would pretty quickly have been exposed.

Basically there seem to have been two main alternative theories around at the time Matthew wrote. Let's have a look at the way Matthew deals with them:

**Theory 1: The disciples stole the body**  
(That is: They *knew* he hadn't risen)

The Jewish authorities had become totally paranoid about anything to do with Jesus. When you think about it that's quite understandable. They, like everybody else, knew that he was a worker of great miracles. They didn't like his miraculous healings, especially when they happened on the Sabbath, but they never denied their reality. They knew that he was totally innocent of the charges they had made against him and that according to the terms of their law he should never have been killed. They were aware that Pilate, the Roman governor, thought Jesus was innocent too and had only agreed to his execution in order to make his own life easier. They had had to deal with the fact that even the man who betrayed Jesus to them had recanted, shouted Jesus innocent and returned the bribe money with tears and sorrow. They were really, really uptight about Jesus. And, living in an occupied country, trying to maintain their own positions between the Romans who they hated and the popular zealots who would start a revolution at the drop of a hat, you can see why that would be.

So it's not at all surprising that they decide to put a guard on Jesus tomb. After all he had said obscure things about rising from the dead. Although we know the followers of Jesus didn't have a clue what he was talking about, the Jewish leaders wanted to avoid anything happening that could possibly be used to continue to stoke the popularity of this man Jesus, who, as far as they were concerned, was a real threat to national security.

There was no question in their minds that Jesus really might rise from the dead. They knew as well as we do that dead people don't rise. They were not putting guards on the tomb to kill Jesus again in case he should be resurrected. They put guards on the tomb to prevent a fraud. To stop the disciples saying that Jesus had been raised when he really hadn't.

The Jews, of course, couldn't just act on their own. They had to ask the Romans to do anything military. So they ask Pilate, the Roman governor of

the province, to guard the tomb. But Pilate was not impressed. He too knew that dead people don't rise. And he can't think of any possible advantage to the followers of Jesus to stealing the body. So he refuses to allow Roman soldiers to be given extra work and tells the Jewish leaders they will have to station their own temple guards there.

I think that Pilate is having a bit of a laugh at their expense. "Go, make the tomb as secure as you know how." is meant to be ironic. "Fortify this impressive military objective" he says. "You were afraid of Jesus when he was alive. And you're still afraid of his influence now that he's dead. You got what you wanted, but it doesn't seem to have helped you very much!"

Of course after the resurrection happened the same story, "the disciples stole the body" was still used; even if they had to bribe the guards to keep quiet about what *really* happened.

Interestingly the fact that they bribed the guards afterwards suggests that the Jewish authorities believed the story the guards told about the earthquake and the angel. Think about it. If the Jewish leaders thought the guards really had fallen asleep and allowed Jesus' disciples to steal the body what would they have done? They wouldn't have given them a lot of money would they? They would have had the guards executed for dereliction of duty!

And in any case if the disciples (or even grave robbers) had come while the guards were asleep surely the sensible thing to have done would be to quietly kill the guards first rather than hoping they'd stay sleeping peacefully while you lugged a two tonne stone around!

**Theory 2: The disciples went to the wrong tomb.**  
(That is: They really believed he had risen.)

The other main "explanation" for the resurrection story in Matthew's day seems to have been that the disciples in their grief simply got mixed up and went to the wrong tomb. Or went to a shared tomb and didn't realise that one of the bodies in it was Jesus' body.

But Matthew makes it quite clear that simply is not possible. To start with he has already told us that this was a new tomb in which no other bodies had ever been put (27:60).

Then he shows us that the women who went to the tomb when Jesus was buried in it are the same

women who went back again on the Sunday morning. There is no question that they have gone to the wrong place!

### **The real issue: What IS the resurrection claim?**

If you listen to lots of people talk about the resurrection what they basically end up saying is that back in the first century at least some people were daft enough to believe that dead people came to life again and that this explains why some people believed the crazy ideas of the first Christians that Jesus rose again whereas today, of course, nobody can really be expected to believe that.

But if you read Matthew what you'll see is that nobody at the time thought Jesus was going to rise again either:

- Pilate didn't – we know that because he's cynical about their request for a guard.
- The Jews didn't – we know that because they think the thing that might happen is that the body could be stolen.
- The women didn't – we know that because they come expecting to find a body.
- The disciples didn't – because they've gone into hiding and are nowhere to be seen!

And the reason they didn't think he was going to rise again was because people from 2,000 years ago were not as stupid as we sometimes tend to think. Everybody in the ancient world was quite clear, just like everybody is today, that dead people stay dead.

Some people, like the Sadducees and the Romans, thought that they stayed dead forever. Some of those people believed that there was a soul that lived on after death; and some didn't.

Other people, like the Pharisees, believed that everybody, or at least every good person, would rise again on a last day when God himself would judge the world.

But nobody expected Jesus, as a kind of one-off, to rise from the dead. This is not a story that anybody in the ancient world would make up because it simply didn't fit with any known way of thinking about the world.

For people then, just like people today, there were three main options of how life and death were thought about.

**Option 1:** There is nothing else; this is it and death is the end.

**Option 2:** There is some sort of spiritual state where your soul goes after the death of your body.

**Option 3:** There is some sort of future world coming when the dead will be raised.

It may surprise you to know that the teaching of the Bible is that options 2 and 3 are both true. But that according to all the Bible writers it is option 3, the resurrection of the dead to a future world, that is by far the most important.

And what Matthew is saying in his account of the resurrection, the massive surprise of the Christian message, is that in the person of Jesus Christ that future world has now arrived in our world.

Jesus resurrection wasn't a glitch in the Matrix. It was, instead, the beginning of a new universe, a new world order if you like, in the middle of this world.

Matthew is not claiming that Jesus is a weird exception to the laws of biology in this life. What he is saying is that the laws of biology; that the dead don't rise, are only applicable to the world we currently inhabit. And Matthew wants us to know that this world, this kingdom, is not the only one there is.

There is another kingdom, another world; Christ's kingdom. And because that kingdom is one of life beyond death it is also a kingdom of hope.

## **2 The question of life: We can live in hope because resurrection is for all.**

It's easy for us, living in a part of the world at a time in history where the dominant view of the world, if people are being honest, is that when you die that's it, to think that maybe the disciples made up the resurrection and sort of willed themselves to believe it to give them greater hope in the face of the terrors of death.

But that is a completely ridiculous thing to think. Because the disciples were orthodox, Bible believing Jews. They didn't need a new hope in the face of death. Because they weren't lacking hope in the face of death. The, disciples, and almost all ancient Jews apart from a few weird sects, believed that they would be resurrected at the final judgment and receive life from God. We know that because at least one of the disciples, Martha, said so to Jesus. The disciples didn't need the resurrection of Jesus to convince them that one day

the dead would be raised. They already believed that.

All people are doing by suggesting that the disciples were providing themselves with some sort of spiritual crutch with the resurrection story is projecting 21<sup>st</sup> century fears about death being the end back onto 1<sup>st</sup> century people who didn't have those fears!

We live in a time and place in the world where it is very difficult to believe in life after death. So it's true and important that the resurrection of Jesus is a powerful sign to us that death is not the end.

More than that it is a powerful sign to us that the great hope for God's world is not that we will be disembodied souls floating around in a heavenly space. That's not what the gospel writers describe as happening to Jesus. The Jews and Romans had plenty of ways of describing the soul living on after death and resurrection was the one word they would **not** use to describe that. It's quite plain that all the Christians believed in a physical resurrection. The old body of Jesus had, somehow, been "used up" to make his new body. The angel's words in v6, make that clear: "He is not here for he is risen" is absolutely linked to "come see the place where he lay". If the angel meant that Jesus' soul or spirit lived on it wouldn't have mattered whether the body was still there or not would it? The reason it is vital that the body is gone is that the resurrection is a physical one.

For us the resurrection is a wonderful sign that physical life after death is possible. That that is God's plan for the world.

But the disciples, I suspect, never doubted that. They didn't need Jesus resurrection to convince them of the reality of a physical resurrection at the end of time. So for them the resurrection was mostly a sign of two other things that are vital for us to learn this morning:

**a) The resurrection is all about Jesus Christ the King**

Jesus tells his followers to go to Galilee to meet with him. So they go. And then, we are told in v17, that when they saw him they worshipped him, but some doubted.

And I want to ask: what it was they doubted? Definitely not that life after death was possible – they had always believed that. Surely not that Jesus was alive. After all they had just trekked dozens of

miles, probably on foot, to see him. You wouldn't do that if you didn't think it was true. What they doubted is exactly what Matthew tells us – should they worship him? After all these Jewish people had been brought up to believe that God alone should be worshipped. In the resurrected Jesus they saw every evidence that here was God in the flesh and yet it must still have felt strange to adore as divine somebody they also knew to be human.

They hesitated about worshipping him. And in that context that Jesus' words make perfect sense. "All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me." It's OK to worship me, Jesus is saying, because I have the power of God. Everything that God has, total authority over the whole universe, I have.

For the first disciples the most important thing they needed to learn about the resurrection was that it showed Jesus was the king.

Back then, and still today, all sorts of people believe in all sorts of variations on life after death. But the critical thing about the Easter story is that it shows not just that there is life after death. Not just that a new world is being created by God that will one day completely transform this world. Not just that but that Jesus is the king of that world.

So unless Jesus is our king that new world is not for us.

The fact that the tomb was really empty because Jesus' resurrection body had used up his old body; he was not a ghost. He was physically alive. The fact that the best explanation the Jewish authorities could come up with involved making experienced guards out to be incompetent and paying them large amounts of hush money. In short the inescapable fact that Jesus really did rise from the dead in real history is not there just to tell us that atheists are wrong and that death is not the end.

It did not even happen *just* to make us believe that God is going to act decisively in history to bring about a new world without suffering, disease and death.

It happened so that we might believe that the God who created the universe is recreating it with Jesus as its undisputed king.

That's very important so let me repeat it for you: The resurrection happened so that we might believe that the God who created the universe is recreating it with Jesus as king.

That means Easter is not about new life as such. The heart of Easter can never be captured by eggs hatching, baby lambs and rabbits and flowers coming into bloom, as wonderful and God-given as all those things are.

Because Easter is about Jesus being God's king. And nothing short of responding to him as the disciples did in Galilee, with worship, is an adequate reaction to the Easter story.

This morning if you would not call yourself a Christian but still like the idea of a metaphor of life after death.

Or if you would call yourself a Christian because you feel that the Easter story encapsulates something precious about a spiritual existence for us after we die.

Well if either of those is you I have to tell you that the truth is that you haven't understood Easter at all. Easter is about a physical resurrection that proclaims Jesus to be the king of the world and the Easter story demands that we worship him.

And that demand of worship is not just for a few first century of followers of Jesus. Because the second vital thing that the disciples had to learn was that...

### **b) The resurrection is for people of all nations**

For those of us brought up in the Americas or Western Europe I guess the idea that the Christian message is one that anybody, whatever their race or nationality, can come to believe in and join the church is pretty much a given.

In fact that missionary element to Christianity; the idea that the message about Jesus is good news that should be taken to all people has come in for quite a lot of flak in recent years with people saying how terrible it is that Christians encourage people in, for example, tribal religions, to convert and believe something different.

This, we are told, is destroying such people's ethnic identity. Mind you I can imagine that if Christians told those same tribesmen and women that they weren't allowed to become Christians that too would be said to be terrible and racist and awful etc etc.. There are some people you just can't win with!

But to a first century Jew the idea that the benefits of being one of God's people, the possibility of

participating in the great resurrection to blessing at the last day when God came in power to judge the earth, that all that should be open to just anyone, from any nation was radical beyond belief.

Sure the Jews knew that God wanted to make their nation a beacon of light and hope to the world. But they seem universally to have thought that this would mean lots of people becoming Jews. They thought that the nations would come to them.

But Jesus says exactly the opposite. Instead of waiting for the nations to **come** these disciples, God's people who have seen the risen Jesus, are to **go** to all nations. And when they get there they aren't to make people Jewish. They aren't to have them circumcised and following the Sabbath and the food laws. They are, Jesus says, simply, to baptise them in water and teach them to follow his teachings about who he is and how to live in response to that.

The followers of Jesus are to tell the people about the kingdom of God that has now begun to arrive. A kingdom of peace and hope and joy that lasts forever. A kingdom where all the citizens will live eternally in a perfect world, with perfect bodies, in perfect relationship with God and each other.

A kingdom whose reality is guaranteed to us by the fact that its king, Jesus, already has that resurrection body and so has proved that in this new kingdom death is defeated.

For the first disciples that meant overcoming deeply held prejudices to go to all sorts of places they would never have dreamed of going and accepting that all sorts of people could join in with God's great project to recreate the world simply by believing in and responding to Jesus Christ.

For us it has varying implications depending on who you are.

If you are here this morning and you are not a Christian it means that there are no reasons not to be one. The evidence of the resurrection is clear. And Jesus has explicitly removed any barrier that could stop you joining his family. It's not just for men. Or just for adults. Or just for whites. Or just for people with degrees. The resurrection is for anyone who will put their trust in Jesus.

And if you are a Christian here this morning this means that there are no excuses. The commission of the risen Jesus to his disciples, not just the first followers of Jesus but all his people till the end of

the age, is to take his good news out. It is not good enough just to wait for people to come to us. To sit in your office waiting for people to hear from someone else that you are a Christian and hoping they'll come and ask you what that means.

Jesus commands his people to go. Most of us don't have to go very far to make disciples of Jesus. Most of us won't go to Africa or South America or the Middle East or Asia to do that – though I very much hope that some of us will.

But the message of Jesus is so important that everybody needs to hear it – that bloke at the next desk, the teacher in the next classroom, the student in the next seat in the seminar room, the person you're sitting next to on the train when you go to London on business. The person you are sitting next to on the plane when you fly to Italy on holiday.

The resurrection of Jesus marks the most radical change in the world since Adam and Eve disobeyed God in the Garden of Eden. For it decisively inaugurates God's new age. The new world he is making breaking into the world we live in.

And it must mark a radical change in God's people. Instead of waiting for others to come to us the resurrection of Jesus means we must go to them.

Because the resurrection is for them too. They can join in. All can join in. Each of us can be one day as Jesus is now; resurrected to perfect and eternal life.

"Where there's life", they say, "there's hope." And because Jesus life is not just inextinguishable but offered to you and me for us to share in this Easter if you put your trust in Jesus there is hope for you too.

Why not do that, for the first time, or afresh, this morning?

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