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Believing Christ is Risen: Easter 3 (Luke 24: 1-12)

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‘But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them’ (Lk 24: 11). From the very beginning, the claim that Jesus has been raised from death to a new kind of life was hard to swallow. The gospel stories of Jesus’ appearance to the disciples implicitly acknowledge this. They allude to the disciples’ difficulty in accepting the story, the process involved in their coming to believe. After all, the dead don’t come back to life and the claim that Jesus had done so was no easier for those in first-century Palestine to believe than it is for the so-called ‘modern’ mind.

So it doesn’t seem a very promising or reliable foundation on which to base everything else – your vision of God, your sense of human meaning and possibility, your whole way of being in the world. And yet, that’s what Christianity does. As biblical theologian Thorwald Lorenzen has said: ‘The resurrection is not merely an object of faith, and it is not merely a credal statement to accept; it is the *origin* and *ground* of faith. Here the *nature* and *content* of faith, what Christian faith is, is decided’.¹ Over the next three weeks, I’d like us to explore in a bit more depth how that’s so – *how* resurrection is the foundation of our faith. And tonight, as part of that, to explore what it means or could mean for us to *believe* that Christ is risen.

From the point of view of faith, belief in the resurrection seems to have two necessary components. One is that something happened to Jesus after his death. The second is that this something makes a difference to the possibilities of life ever afterwards. It’s not just some weird anomalous phenomenon that happened once upon a time, but it’s connected to and has implications for everything else. Let’s look at both these components, starting with the second.

¹ Thorwald Lorenzen, *Resurrection and Discipleship: Interpretive Models, Biblical Reflections, Theological Consequences* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), p.1.

The sense that the resurrection has world changing implications is everywhere in the New Testament. Encounter with the risen Jesus, as told in the gospels, is connected always to the opening up of new life, new possibilities for being, a new sense of meaning and vocation. What is it about Jesus' being raised from the dead, and returning to his disciples that could have had that effect?

In the first instance, the stories of Jesus' resurrection reveal something about God, and about the basic dynamic of reality. They communicate that God's love for the world cannot be cancelled by the world's violence and hostility, that God's welcome is ever-renewed, and that God is only ever towards us and everyone else as life, forgiveness and restoration. From this revelation comes the astonished and grateful proclamation in the Johannine tradition that God is love, that God is light in whom there is no darkness at all. This new understanding, according to James Alison, is part of the gospel's process of pruning the violence from our image of God. No longer is God to be envisaged as a tetchy deity liable to vengeance, whom it's our job to placate. No, in the resurrection, Jesus returns to the disciples breathing peace, inviting them into renewed relationship with him, liberating them from their fear and paralysis.

And for the disciples, this means they need no longer live as if they are essentially threatened – whether by fear of a violent God or fear of death or fear of shame or of what others may do. They now see, they now *believe* that the deep and abiding context of everything is accepting and un-killable love, love freely offered – which is grace. They have experienced that the basic dynamic of life with God is towards healing and reconciliation. According to the New Testament, that realization, that *belief*, transforms their basic stance in life. They can be generous, they can forgive, they can be bold, they can risk for the sake of truth and fuller life – all this becomes possible because they no longer need to secure their lives or safety or meaning for themselves. As Jesus, in John's gospel, is remembered to have said: 'Because I live, you also will live' (John 14: 19).

We can see how the resurrection of the crucified Jesus and the manner of his return, as depicted in the New Testament stories, would open up this new way of being. But how can we know it's true? Why should we believe *this* picture of reality? As Kieren pointed out last week, the stories which testify to the disciples' experience of resurrection (think of Peter being forgiven and his calling renewed, of Mary being recognized, called by name, of the disciples freed from their fear in the upper room) – all were written well after the event and in order to express an understanding that's already been achieved. The stories don't *prove* the resurrection – they reflect faith in it, they reflect the experience of communities already beginning to live in the light of this proclamation. So what if they just made it up? What if they were just deluded?

Well, here for me, is the critical point. If it's the *lives* of the disciples, the life of the earliest Christian community that points to some new vision of life, some new empowerment for living having been given to them – then part of our assessment of the truth of their faith is to do with the truthfulness of their lives. In other words, does this way of imaging God and imagining the basic nature of things form them, form us in truer ways of being? Living from here, are we able to hear each other into deeper, more authentic speech? Is our love made less possessive, more healing? Is our vision clarified, our speech simplified? Are we freer and more courageous? There's no neutral, totally objective place we can stand to test all this – but we can discern differences. We know that certain ideologies and beliefs lead to destruction and self-delusion, to death rather than life. We know that in the lives of the saints (many of them at least) that we glimpse a fuller, more realized wisdom and humanity. It's the testimony of lives that in the end proves the truthfulness (or not) of the beliefs and commitments that animate and form them.

But this focus on the effect of resurrection faith on Jesus' disciples still leaves open the question of what resurrection actually was. Our tradition proclaims the resurrection of the body. Something happened after his death to the dead Jesus and it's connected to the discovery of the empty tomb. For many people, then as now,

this seems just a bridge too far. Some contemporary scholars suggest that insistence on the physical resurrection is just a crude literalising of a powerful and valuable metaphor. On this view, what made the difference for the earliest Christians and did indeed transform their lives, was that after Jesus' death, they realized that his way of life, his vision of God, did not have to die with him, and so they patterned their lives, their theology after his. It's in this sense that he is no longer dead; he is risen in the community of believers, he is risen in our hearts. And, on this view, that's just what believing in the resurrection means.

It's a powerful argument. And yet, I find myself unwilling to abandon the difficult and stubborn faith in the resurrection of the body. Theologian Brian Robinette says, 'even a superficial reading of the New Testament reveals that *because* Jesus is risen there is faith – not the other way around'.² And if Jesus' physical resurrection is hard to believe, it's almost as hard to swallow the proposition that the fearful and disoriented disciples could really have regathered themselves and begun proclaiming their disgraced and crucified leader as Lord, without something radically new having broken in upon them, something much more powerful than anything they were in a position to generate.

On Easter Day, I spoke about the gospels' striking testimony that what the disciples are first present to on resurrection morn is a space – that is, an 'absence', an empty tomb, the space where the corpse was. The New Testament shows no interest in the moment of resurrection – *how* it was that the body was raised. But *that* the body was raised seems to have been the source of all that follows. Now death and the powers that wield death really do have no more dominion; now we really are liberated from fear and threat, and empowered to love and live. For Jesus is risen, he is risen indeed.

² Brian Robinette, *Grammars of Resurrection: A Christian Theology of Presence and Absence* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2009), p.63.