

Sermon Easter Sunday 2019

Luke 24:1-12

On the Sunday morning the women come to the tomb in order to embalm the body of Jesus. In the Middle East tombs were usually caves, carved out of rock, with shelves on which the body was laid, once it had been wrapped in strips of linen cloth. The purpose of the embalming was to negate the smell of the decomposing body, and also to speed up the decomposing. The tomb was not the final resting place. When decomposition had run its course, the bones were buried in a small container known as an ossuary.

The tomb was closed off with a large circular stone, set in a groove, and which could be rolled into place. When the women arrived, the stone had been rolled back, and of course, the tomb was empty.

It is interesting that it was women who discovered the empty tomb. If nothing else, this gives credence to the story. If anyone wanted to create the story of the empty tomb, the risen Christ, they certainly would not have attributed the discovery to women, simply because in those days women were not considered to be reliable witnesses. That's just how it was!

It is also interesting that, according to both Luke's and John's gospels, it was Peter who was the first disciple to get to the empty tomb to see for himself. This was the Peter who just a couple of days ago had denied that he knew Jesus. There is a certain irony at play here. Does Peter represent something of us? There are times when what we say or do belies the fact that we have a relationship with Christ, but then there are, of course, times when we are confronted with the reality of Christ and our faith is assured.

The evidence of Christ's resurrection has been examined more carefully than evidence of any other fact in history. It has been weighed and considered by great scholars down the ages. One example is Simon Greenleaf, professor of law at Harvard University from 1833 to 1848. He helped bring Harvard Law School to prominence, and is viewed as one of the greatest authorities on legal evidence in the history of the world. When Greenleaf examined the resurrection in light of all the laws of evidence, he concluded it was a reality and an historical event, and that anyone who honestly examined the evidence would be convinced this was the case.

Another example is Dr Frank Morrison, a British lawyer who set out to write a book repudiating the resurrection of Christ. He did write his book, but it wasn't the book he intended to write! As he examined the evidence, this sceptical lawyer found it so overwhelming that he was forced to accept it, and became a believer. The book he wrote, *Who Moved the Stone?*, details evidence of the resurrection. In the first chapter, entitled, 'The Book that Refused to be Written', he describes his experience in this way – *'It was as though a man set out to cross a forest by a familiar and well-beaten track and came out suddenly where he did not expect to come out. The point of entry was the same; it was the point of emergence that was different.'* There are countless other similar stories.

So what can we take from the resurrection of Jesus? What does it mean to us and for us? Where on earth do we begin? Perhaps I could begin with the word *relationship*. There two relationships which are important, two relationships as given to us by Jesus Christ. When Jesus was asked by the Pharisees which is the most important commandment in the law of Moses, he replied, *'You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment.'* (Matthew 22:37).

Two weeks ago I spoke about priorities. Well here is our first priority, to love God, and dear Jesus, in dying on the cross and then walking out of that tomb two days later, has paved the way for that relationship. In revealing himself as God (let's be honest, only God could walk out of that tomb), he has not only made God very real but he has also made it so much easier for us to relate to God. In coming to us in human form, we can now more easily understand God, not fully, because that won't really happen until we come face to face with him, but enough to form a relationship with him that was not possible before. So that is our first relationship.

Then, of course, Jesus went on to say, in referring to the important commandments, *'A second is equally important* (notice he says 'equally important'): *Love your neighbour as yourself.'*

So here is our second relationship, and who does it involve? Absolutely everyone. Jesus has hit on something that is all-embracing and universal – without people we have nothing. Without relationships, and by that I mean healthy and meaningful relationships, we are nothing. We are shaped, sustained, uplifted, identified by our relationships. Anything else – wealth, achievements, talent, intelligence – is meaningless without good relationships. Without good relationships we are like a lake without water, a classroom without students, a stage without actors, a vase without flowers, a church without people. We are empty. Now the point is this, if Christ's resurrection opens the way to a relationship with God, then we have no option but to embrace our neighbour, to reach out in love to those around us, and this applies especially to those in need.

Now here is some hope – statistically believers are found to be healthier, happier and live longer. They also, and this is really the important point here, give much more to charity, both time and money, than non-believers do. Several years ago, at a meeting of atheist scientists in America, one speaker conceded that belief in God seems to motivate people to help others. He referred to the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina when churches all over the United States sent people, money and supplies to meet the need of the people of New Orleans. He reflected that as far as he was aware no atheist group has responded at all. Clearly, religious people do not have a monopoly on acts of kindness, but statistically they steal the show!

The impact on the world of the Resurrection of Christ has been massive. Without the Resurrection we would not have the Christian religion as we know it. Lying at the heart of the Christian religion is our relationship with God and our relationship with one another. One of the messages of Easter is surely this; there two priorities of equal importance in life – to embrace God and to embrace people, people of every complexion, disposition and type. Let me finish with a pertinent story.

A young man who had been raised as an atheist was training to be an Olympic diver. The only religious influence in his life came from his religious friend. The young diver never really paid much attention when his friend spoke about his faith.

One night the diver went to the indoor pool at the college he attended. The lights were off, but as the pool had big skylights and the moon was bright, there was plenty of light to practise by, and besides, he thought it would be a nice change to practise by moonlight. The young man climbed up to the highest diving board and as he turned his back to the pool on the edge of the board and extended his arms out, he saw his shadow on the wall. The shadow of his body, with his arms outstretched, was in the shape of a cross. The man felt a strange feeling, like someone was speaking to him. Instead of diving, he knelt down and finally asked God to come into his life. As the young man stood up, a maintenance man walked in and turned the lights on. The pool had been drained for repairs!