

Week 5

Keep thinking

In Week 1, I encouraged you to *think*. Lots of people have long given up on real thinking and engaging with the big questions. Instead, they snuggle deep down inside the rabbit's fur and don't venture up to the tips to try and get a look beyond. The fact that you've read this far, suggests that like Zachaeus, to some extent, you're seeking to see. The weird illustration of the rabbit and the magician's hat came from a philosopher. We haven't really been engaging in philosophy – we've been investigating the Bible. That said, let me give you a quote from a different philosopher.

His name is Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855). Kierkegaard was a Danish philosopher and is considered by many as a theologian too. By all accounts he was quite a grumpy man. He was very critical of the society he was part of. So much so, he was even described as the 'enemy of the people'. He may have disagreed with much that I've written so far, but the reason for his criticism of nineteenth century Danish society is worth considering here. Kierkegaard was critical of what has been described as "Sunday Christianity".¹ He was frustrated that people could attend church on a Sunday, but live the rest of the week as if Jesus did not matter at all. He wrote this:

The Bible is very easy to understand. But we Christians (he means 'Sunday Christians') are a bunch of scheming swindlers. We pretend to be unable to understand it because we know very well that the minute we understand, we are obliged to act accordingly.

¹ The term is used by Jostein Gaarder in *Sophie's World*

His point was that who Jesus claimed to be is so momentous, it should change everything about us. Jostein Gaarder explains Kierkegaard's thinking like this:

either Jesus rose on Easter Day – or he did not. And if he really did rise from the dead, if he really died for our sake – then this is so overwhelming that it must permeate our entire life.²

If Jesus really did rise from the dead then it should turn our world upside down. The resurrection of Jesus means that he must really have been who he said he was. It must mean that though he was a man, he was also God. If however, Jesus did not rise from the dead, then why should we pay any attention to what he has to say? The apostle Paul, when he wrote about the resurrection, described it as being of “first importance”. In fact he saw both the death and resurrection of Jesus as one, inseparable event. He wrote:

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures³

Why did Paul consider it to be of first importance? He went on to write this:

But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain.⁴

If Jesus did not rise from the dead, Christianity collapses. It's perhaps useful for a bit of social cohesion, a good sing-song and candles at Christmas, but no longer something life-changing. Therefore we need to ask: is the resurrection of Jesus historical fact?

² Sophie's World p314

³ 1 Corinthians 15:3-4

⁴ 1 Corinthians 15:13-14

Christianity is based on truth and not feelings. Our society today perhaps puts less emphasis on truth than it once did. A few years ago, an autobiographical book was published called *A Million Little Pieces*. In it, James Frey describes his experience as an alcoholic and drug abuser and his journey through rehabilitation. The book was a bestseller. Al Mohler describes what happened next:

It turned out that all the awful and excruciating experiences about which he wrote he had not actually experienced. Although he wrote in the genre of personal memoir, it turned out that it wasn't...Two years later Frey told a reporter for *USA Today*, "I wanted to play with the idea of what is fiction and what is nonfiction. I don't think the label is important. It's all manipulated material...What is important to me is making a connection with the readers. That they feel something.

Christianity certainly connects. Real Christians *feel*. But their feelings are in response to truth. Many people might come to church and enjoy it. You might come to enjoy atmosphere, whether that comes from choristers and candlelight, traditional hymns or lively music. But real Christianity is based on truth. The Bible does not call you to blind faith. Christianity is based on the historical fact of the resurrection. So let's consider – did it really happen?

Historical evidence for the resurrection

Luke records the discovery of the empty tomb.

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb, taking the spices they had prepared.² And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb,³ but when they went in they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus.⁴ While they were perplexed about this, behold, two men stood by them in dazzling apparel.⁵ And as they were frightened and bowed their faces to the ground, the men said to them, "Why do you seek the living among the dead?"⁶ He is not here, but

has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, ⁷ that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise.” ⁸ And they remembered his words,⁹ and returning from the tomb they told all these things to the eleven and to all the rest. ¹⁰ Now it was Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women with them who told these things to the apostles, ¹¹ but these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. ¹² But Peter rose and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; and he went home marveling at what had happened.⁵

The first thing to notice is that Luke records that it was women who first discovered the empty tomb. The significance of this is that women in first century Jewish culture were not considered to be reliable witnesses. If you were to write what you might consider to be the most compelling and convincing account of the resurrection, you would put men on the scene. The only reason Luke would put the women there first was if that’s the way it really happened!

Notice too that the men, when they heard the news, did not believe it. They considered it to be an idle tale. For convenience, most of the Bible references we’ve looked at have been from Luke’s gospel. However, his gospel is not the only contribution Luke made to the Bible canon. Luke also wrote *The Acts of the Apostles*. It’s his Part Two. It describes what happens next. We find that the disciples no longer consider the resurrection to be an idle tale. Rather, they are preaching boldly that Jesus died *and rose*.

The Acts of the Apostles begins in the city of Jerusalem. That’s significant. The book begins only a few weeks after the death of Jesus. Jerusalem was the city where a few weeks earlier, Jesus had been welcomed and hailed King. His entrance, riding on a donkey, had caused a stir.

⁵ Luke 24:1-12

And as he rode along, they spread their cloaks on the road. As he was drawing near—already on the way down the Mount of Olives—the whole multitude of his disciples began to rejoice and praise God with a loud voice for all the mighty works that they had seen, saying, “Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!” And some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, rebuke your disciples.”⁶

It was also in Jerusalem that the crowds had turned against him and cried out for his crucifixion.

Pilate then called together the chief priests and the rulers and the people, and said to them, “You brought me this man as one who was misleading the people. And after examining him before you, behold, I did not find this man guilty of any of your charges against him. Neither did Herod, for he sent him back to us. Look, nothing deserving death has been done by him. I will therefore punish and release him.” But they all cried out together, “Away with this man, and release to us Barabbas”— a man who had been thrown into prison for an insurrection started in the city and for murder. Pilate addressed them once more, desiring to release Jesus, but they kept shouting, “Crucify, crucify him!” A third time he said to them, “Why? What evil has he done? I have found in him no guilt deserving death. I will therefore punish and release him.” But they were urgent, demanding with loud cries that he should be crucified. And their voices prevailed. So Pilate decided that their demand should be granted. He released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, for whom they asked, but he delivered Jesus over to their will.⁷

Everyone who’d been in Jerusalem would know about Jesus, including what happened to him, namely, his death on the cross. After the resurrection, the risen Jesus appeared to two of his followers as they walked along the road. They didn’t recognise him. He asked them what they were talking about. Their reply is interesting:

⁶ Luke 19:36-39

⁷ Luke 23:13-25

Then one of them, named Cleopas, answered him, “Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?”⁸

No one in Jerusalem could have been ignorant of Jesus. In my little community, I’m fairly anonymous. Not Jesus. All Jerusalem knew about him.

But just a few weeks after his death, the disciples were boldly preaching that he was risen. Everyone would have known who they were talking about. Would they have got away with this if Jesus’ body lay in a local tomb? That would soon have quashed their message. However, no body is produced from any tomb.

It is significant that when their preaching is opposed, the opposition does not point to bones in a tomb. Matthew’s gospel records the form in which the opposition came:

While they were going, behold, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests all that had taken place.¹² And when they had assembled with the elders and taken counsel, they gave a sufficient sum of money to the soldiers¹³ and said, “Tell people, ‘His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.’¹⁴ And if this comes to the governor’s ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.”¹⁵ So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story has been spread among the Jews to this day.⁹

The significance of this opposition is that it tells us that the evidence of an empty tomb was too strong to deny. The Jews opposing the disciples had to concede that the tomb was indeed empty. We need to understand that the last thing Jesus’ enemies wanted was an empty tomb. The empty tomb was only giving substance to the message the disciples preached.

⁸ Luke 24:18

⁹ Matthew 28:11-15

Located in the Old City of Jerusalem today is the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. There, is what some consider to be the tomb in which Jesus' body was laid. It was covered in marble cladding in about 1555. The church was not built there until over three centuries after Jesus' death. Many tourists visit a different site, called The Garden Tomb, although most archaeologists consider it far less likely that Jesus was buried there. The fact is, for the first three centuries of Christianity, the tomb was completely insignificant. Jesus was not there. In the first century, there was a tradition where the tombs of significant men became shrines that followers visited. At the time of Jesus' death, there existed probably fifty or so shrines of this kind in Jerusalem. No shrine came into existence for Jesus because his bones were not there.

Is there another explanation? The fact of an empty tomb was not denied at the very beginning, so what could have happened to the body of Jesus? Is the rumor put about that Jesus' disciples stole the body in fact credible? We've seen that it was not in the interest of Jesus' Jewish enemies to remove the body, or for that matter, in the interest of the Romans. They wanted to extinguish his memory and message. That could have happened if they had the body. So *did* the disciples steal the body away?

It seems unlikely. Imagine Roman soldiers falling asleep. Such a thing was punishable by death. Even if they had fallen asleep, imagine what a feat it would have been for the disciples to have tip-toed around the sleeping soldiers, pushed the rock that sealed the entrance to the tomb away and crept off with the body, all without waking the guards. Also, the disciples were anything but brave at this point. In John's account of one of the resurrection appearances, the disciples have locked themselves away for fear of the Jews:

On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.”¹⁰

It seems unlikely that they were capable of such a task. However, imagine they were. Imagine, somehow, they pulled it off. A few weeks later, in Luke’s Part Two, they’re boldly preaching that Jesus rose from the dead. Preaching this message got them in serious trouble. The first martyrdom occurs less than a third of the way into *The Acts of the Apostles*. Today, we live in a world of terrorism. We see people willing to die in the cause of their religion. People are willing to commit suicide in the name of their religion because they *sincerely* believe their religion to be true. However, would the disciples have been so willing to give their lives for something they knew to be false?

Perhaps then, they were sincere men who mistakenly thought they had met the risen Jesus. Maybe in their grief they dreamt it or hallucinated. However, the gospel writers are keen to emphasise the physical nature of the resurrection. As Jesus walked along the road with those two disciples, he sat down and ate with them:

When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened, and they recognized him.¹¹

Hallucinations don’t eat bread! These two disciples rushed to tell Jesus’ closest disciples what they’d seen. As they excitedly told the story, it happened again. The risen Jesus came to them:

And they rose that same hour and returned to Jerusalem. And they found the eleven and those who were with them gathered together, saying, “The Lord has risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon!” Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he was known to them in the

¹⁰ John 20:19

¹¹ Luke 24:30-31

breaking of the bread. As they were talking about these things, Jesus himself stood among them, and said to them, “Peace to you!” But they were startled and frightened and thought they saw a spirit. And he said to them, “Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. And while they still disbelieved for joy and were marveling, he said to them, “Have you anything here to eat?” They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate before them.¹²

Jesus appeared to them. He was no ghost. Jesus showed them his hands and feet. He extended the invitation to touch and see. To demonstrate his physical, bodily resurrection, he sits down to eat.

The apostle Paul also wrote confidently about those to whom Jesus appeared.

Writing only fifteen to twenty years after the death of Jesus, he wrote:

he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep.¹³

Paul writes about people who could say, “I was there. I saw him.” He implies that if any reading wanted to check these things out for themselves, they could do so. They would be able to compare the accounts of those who there, to see if things added up. There is no room for any idea that the resurrection is a legend that developed over time. The claim of the resurrection was there from the very beginning.

Christianity collapses without the historical fact of the resurrection. But we are not called to blind faith. The evidence is compelling. As most of our references over the weeks have come from Luke’s gospel, it’s appropriate to look at the approach he

¹² Luke 24:33-43

¹³ 1 Corinthians 15:5-6

took to writing his gospel. Luke wrote his gospel for a man called Theophilus. At the beginning, he wrote this:

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, ² just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, ³ it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴ that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.¹⁴

Luke wrote to Theophilus as one who had carefully investigated what he'd heard about Jesus. Having spoken to the eyewitnesses he wrote so that Theophilus might have certainty about the truth.

What if it's really true?

The evidence for the resurrection of Jesus is compelling. If Jesus is really risen, the implications are huge. We began with Kierkegaard's frustration. If Jesus is really risen it must permeate our entire lives. If Jesus is risen, then what he said about himself is really true. If Jesus really did rise from the dead, then he really is the man who was God. It means God really is seeking you out. If Jesus rose from the dead, it means that the good news he brought us is true. We are sinful people who have wandered away from God, but he came to rescue us. He paid the penalty that guilty sinners deserve as he died on the cross. The fact that he is risen, means there is no more price to pay. Jesus has done it all for those who trust him.

If Jesus is risen, it means we really do need to repent. We need to make that change of direction in our lives. When I was a geography teacher, I used to teach about the

¹⁴ Luke 1:1-4

volcanic eruption of Mount St. Helens in Washington State in 1980. I was fascinated by the story of Harry Truman. Harry Truman was the owner of the Mount St. Helens lodge. At the time, the world's cameras were on the mountain. The evidence of an imminent eruption was compelling. The whole mountain had changed shape and a huge bulge had formed on its side. Evacuation orders had been issued. Harry lived in the danger zone. He gave interviews where he said that the danger was exaggerated. Harry never left his home and was presumed dead after the eruption on May 18th.

Perhaps Harry really did feel the danger was exaggerated. But the evidence was compelling. Perhaps Harry just loved his mountain.

The evidence for the resurrection is compelling. But for many people, it has not permeated their entire life. It has not turned their life upside down. Maybe, it's not the evidence. Perhaps we're rooted to other things.