

Easter Sunday Sermon

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[0 : 00] When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who was also a disciple of Jesus.

He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. And Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen shroud and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had cut in the rock.

And he rolled a great stone to the entrance of the tomb and went away. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb.

Next day, that is, after the day of preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate and said, Sir, we remember how that imposter said, while he was still alive, after three days I will rise.

Therefore, order the tomb to be made secure until the third day, lest his disciples go and steal him away and tell the people, He is risen from the dead, and the last fraud will be worse than the first.

[1 : 18] Pilate said to them, you have a guard of soldiers. Go, make it as secure as you can. So they went and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone and setting a guard.

Now, after the Sabbath, towards the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb.

And behold, there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat on it.

His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. And for fear of him, the guards trembled and became like dead men.

But the angel said to the women, Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here, for he has risen.

[2 : 19] As he said, Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he is risen from the dead. And behold, he is going before you to Galilee.

There you will see him. See, I have told you. So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy and ran to tell his disciples.

And behold, Jesus met them and said, Greetings. And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshipped him. Then Jesus said to them, Do not be afraid.

Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me. While they were going, behold, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests all that had taken place.

And when they had assembled with the elders and taken counsel, they gave a sufficient sum of money to the soldiers and said, Tell people, his disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.

[3 : 34] And if this comes to the governor's ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble. So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story has been spread among the Jews to this day.

The resurrection fact or fiction. When the Bible talks about the resurrection of Jesus, it is the claim that Jesus died on the cross on Good Friday, and then on that first Easter day, Easter Sunday, he rose from the dead.

In other words, he went through death, out the other side, never to die again. And I simply want us to consider this morning whether you and I should put that in the category of fact, history, fact, or fiction.

The category of facts, along with Ireland winning the Six Nations Rugby, everything, everywhere, all at once, sweeping the Oscars, and Rishi Sunak being Prime Minister, or the category of fiction, along with Romeo and Juliet, Paddington Bear, and Happy Valley.

Not, of course, that we tend to put religious beliefs in the category of fiction, do we? We prefer, I guess, and tend instead to talk about faith. You know, people will say things, things like, you know, I'm glad your faith helps you, or I wish I had your faith.

[5 : 06] People speak of a leap of faith. It's the language of feelings, of beliefs which aren't really grounded in reality, in the way that facts, are.

And yet, when Jesus, and when the Bible talks about faith, it is talking about facts, that we can depend on. In the same way that, I'm not going to do this, but I could ask any one of you, why are you sitting in the chair you're sitting on?

And you might reply and say, well, I've got faith in the chair. By which you don't mean, well, it's pretty rickety, and it's only got three legs, it looks as if it's going to fall apart at any moment, and it's a real act of faith to sit on it.

No, what you mean is, it is dependable. It is trustworthy. And that is very simply what the Bible means by faith. Reliable.

Trustworthy. And so that is my aim this morning, to persuade us that the resurrection of Jesus, from the dead, never to die again, is trustworthy. It is in the category of fact, not of fiction.

[6 : 18] But I also want us to see that the implications of the resurrection of Jesus are glorious, and wonderful, and utterly life-changing.

So then, what are the facts? Well, three facts. Firstly, fact number one, Jesus died. And if you've closed Matthew's Gospel, then you might like to open it again, on page 1006.

We're going to be spending our time in Matthew chapter 27 and 28. So, fact number one, Jesus died. Matthew 27, verse 57.

When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who was also a disciple of Jesus. He went to Pilate, and asked for the body of Jesus.

Then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. Now, Joseph of Arimathea was a member of the Jewish Brooding Council. He was a disciple of Jesus as well. So he goes to Pilate, the Roman governor.

[7 : 20] To ask for the body of Jesus. Now, normally, bodies of those who had been crucified would either be left to rot, or they'd be simply thrown into a common grave. So this is a very unusual request.

And therefore, it is completely inconceivable that Pilate would have handed the body over if Jesus had not already been dead. In fact, Mark's Gospel records that Pilate checked with a centurion whose task it was to oversee the crucifixion just to make sure Jesus was dead.

And of course, if he wasn't dead, it's unthinkable that the centurion would have handed over the body because, of course, he would have been in the firing line himself. Now, there are those who say that Jesus didn't really die at all.

Muslims believe that, for example. But the fact is that the Roman soldiers tasked with crucifixion, they knew what they were doing. And to believe that Jesus, having been beaten and then crucified to within an inch of his life, could then have somehow revived in the cool of the tomb without any medical attention, really is a leap of faith too far.

In fact, a man called David Strauss in the 19th century, who himself was an opponent of Christianity, he put an end, really, to that theory once and for all. He didn't believe in the resurrection, and yet he said this about the idea of Jesus somehow reviving.

[8 : 50] He said, It is impossible that a person who had swollen half dead out of the tomb, who crept about weak and ill, wanting medical treatment, who required bandaging, strengthening and care, could have given the disciples the impression that he was a conqueror over death and the grave, the prince of life.

That's the first fact about Easter. Jesus died. And so, in verse 60, Joseph for Arimathea then places the body of Jesus in an unused family tomb.

To have a family tomb like that would have required investment, it would have required money, a large hole dug in the rock with sufficient shelves on the inside to put the bodies of family members. In other words, this isn't just a kind of random place in the rock that they discover, a cave, which they could have easily have kind of not realised where it was the next day. No, he'd have known exactly where it was.

And it's witness, noticed in verse 61, by Mary Magdalene and the other Mary. Notice, none of this is the language of myth. Matthew doesn't say, you know, someone took the body, some random person took the body and buried it somewhere.

[10:07] No, the details are all here to make the point this is fact. It is verifiable. So, fact one, Jesus died. Fact two, the tomb was empty because the religious authorities are now rattled.

And so, they go to Pilate, the Roman governor. Verse 62. Next day, that is, after the day of preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate and said, Sir, we remember how that imposter said while he was still alive, after three days I will rise.

Therefore, order the tomb to be made secure until the third day, lest his disciples go and steal him away and tell the people he has risen from the dead and the last fraud will be worse than the first. Now, for them, it was quite bad enough that Jesus had claimed to be the Messiah, God's King. How much worse it would be if his followers then claimed that he had risen from the dead.

And of course, all the more so because Jesus himself had said on many occasions that that is what would happen. And so, verse 66, they take a guard of soldiers, they secure the tomb by sealing the stone and setting a guard.

[11:28] That, of course, makes it completely impossible that anyone could actually have stolen the body. In other words, they unwittingly create a situation whereby if the body disappears, if it goes missing, it's because someone who has more power and more might than the Roman Empire takes it and intervenes.

and therefore, when on the first Easter Sunday they discover the tomb is empty and the body is missing, they have a choice. they can either kind of fess up and say, you know, explain what had happened or the kind of mystery of the whole thing, the body had disappeared or they can tell a massive lie and they gave the lie.

Have a look at chapter 28 verse 11 where the guards go to the chief priests and tell them what happened. We're sorry, they say, but we've lost the body and verse 12, chief priests give them presumably what is a very large amount of money and they say in verse 13, tell people his disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.

And perhaps you can imagine how the conversation went, something like this, look, we know it's very embarrassing to tell people that you fell asleep, your professional soldiers, that you fell asleep on the job.

We know the consequences for you could be very serious indeed, but you take the money and we'll make sure that you don't have to bear the consequences. Now, it doesn't even begin, does it, to stand up to scrutiny.

[13:14] You know, you don't have to be a Miss Marple or a Hercule Poirot to work out that this is nonsense. If they'd been asleep, how come they knew the disciples stole the body?

And if the disciples stole the body, how come they remained asleep? This is an enormous stone. You know, the noise that would make, at least one of the soldiers would have woken up and presumably woken the others.

What's more, of course, if the tomb wasn't empty, then why the need for this elaborate cover-up? How else might we explain the empty tomb, other than that Jesus was raised?

Well, some say perhaps Jesus' disciples stole the body. But at this point in Matthew's gospel, as in all the gospels, they are frightened, they are disillusioned.

The idea that somehow they might overcome their fear, overcome their guards and steal the body, spend the rest of their lives preaching that Jesus did indeed rise from the dead, never to die again, and as was in the case of many of them, be willing to die for that.

[14:23] Why, that is inconceivable. Others suggest grave robbers. might they have stolen the body? Well, again, they would have had to get past the guards.

But more than that, why did they take the body? Why take a worthless corpse and leave the precious spices that had been used to anoint Jesus' body, which were actually worth something? So, fact one, Jesus died. Fact two, the tomb was empty. Fact three, Jesus was raised. Chapter 28, verse 1.

Now, after the Sabbath, towards the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. Now, it's worth noticing here, I think, in passing, that if Matthew was making this up as a first century writer, and if he was wanting to write in such a way that was really persuasive and convincing, he would never have had two women as his primary witnesses. For the simple reason that the testimony of women wasn't accepted in a Jewish course of law. You would have two men if you were making this up. So, what is it these two women witness?

[15 : 49] Well, verses 2 to 6. 7. And behold, there was a great earthquake for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning and his clothing white as snow.

And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified.

he is not here for he has risen as he said come see the place where he lay now we're not told whether or not the women saw the earthquake or simply arrived at the scene afterwards but an angel comes to roll back the stone to proclaim that Jesus is risen and the tomb is empty at which point I guess the skeptic may well be thinking to themselves well now we really are in the land of make-believe after all when did you last see an angel but I take it that is precisely the point this is not an everyday occurrence at the start of Matthew's gospel an angel announces the birth of Jesus and here at the end of Matthew's gospel an angel is announcing the resurrection of Jesus never to die again neither of those two things are everyday events and did you notice why the stone was rolled back?

not to let Jesus out but to let the women see inside to see the empty tomb to see there was nobody there well they're then told to go and tell the disciples that Jesus has risen from the dead in verse 8 they do so yes with a great sense of fear because they've seen the power of God but also of course with a great sense of joy they tell the disciples and then Jesus the risen Jesus appears among them verse 9 and behold Jesus met them and said greetings and they came up and took hold of his feet and worship him they take hold of his feet because what they see is not a kind of ghost or an apparition but a real physical body and they worship him because who can this be who can this be but God alone in fact this is the first of a number of resurrection appearances in the New Testament records we'll see another one next week as we get to the end of

Matthew chapter 28 where we'll see Jesus appearing to all the disciples on another occasion the Apostle Paul records that the risen Jesus appeared to more than 500 people on one occasion he is writing less than 20 years after the events he says some of those 500 were still alive I guess the point being that you could go and talk to them you could do your fact checking on them what's more of course the body of Jesus has never actually been found there's no historical record of anything written in the first or second centuries attacking the idea of an empty tomb or claiming that Jesus' corpse had been discovered Tom Anderson the former president of the California Trial Lawyers Association says this let's assume that the written accounts of his appearances to hundreds of people are false I want to pose a question with an event so well publicised don't you think it's reasonable that one historian one eyewitness one antagonist would recall for all time that they had seen

[19 : 52] Christ's body he concludes the silence of history is deafening when it comes to the testimony against the resurrection or as we might put it if the insiders inside Boris Johnson's cabinet were unable to cover up their partying during lockdown how much harder it would have been for the disciples to cover up the fact that the whole thing was a hoax if Jesus didn't indeed rise from the dead never to die again what's more of course the apostles begin preaching the fact of the resurrection of Jesus in Jerusalem where the events of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection took place that is not is it the way which kind of legends and myths usually take hold they usually take root in foreign places you're far away from the original events many years later however in the case of the resurrection the preaching of the risen Jesus occurs in the very city in which the events took place every possible fact could have been investigated thoroughly so three facts

Jesus died the tomb was empty Jesus rose rose from the dead well let me finish by pointing us to the significance of the resurrection a friend of ours used to live in Chelsea and he tells a story of a drinks party he was invited to a very smart drinks party he was invited to one Saturday evening and one guest he got chatting to was called Eric and they talked about all the sort of things you talk about at a drinks party you know where he lived where he worked he was a musician family and so on and then as the conversation drew to an end my friend having forgotten the name of this bloke said just remind me of your name Eric he said Eric Clapton and it was only at that point that my friend kind of did a kind of sort of a double take quickly realised he had to completely reassess the whole conversation and this person he had been talking to that he had he had actually been speaking to the greatest rock guitarist that we have known in the last 50, 60 years or so well I wonder if some of us need to reassess the person of

Jesus to move if you like the resurrection from the category of fiction to the category of fact but not just a kind of fact that's true I mean there are loads of facts aren't there which are true but don't have a huge importance for us or significance for us no a fact that is both true and enormously significant something that really really matters why?

well because the resurrection of Jesus changes it changes both the future and the present firstly it changes the future Jesus said I am the way the truth and the life no one comes the father to God except through me isn't that an outrageous claim?

no one comes to the father except through me I mean how can you say that in our culture? there's so many different religions so many faiths eternal life found in Jesus alone well yes simply because Jesus' resurrection from the dead confirms that he is indeed God in the flesh it demonstrates there's more to life than this world it demonstrates death is not the end but above all it means that Jesus' death on the cross for sins paying the penalty for our sin was effective and that of course is the very best news in the world it means those who are followers of Jesus here this morning it means that our sins are forgiven and we can be absolutely confident in the forgiveness of sins it means we can know Jesus in this life through all the ups and downs of life knowing that yes like him we will go down into the grave but actually like him we will then be raised to new life in the new creation in the next world let me say it again it is not arrogant to believe that no it is based on a humble assessment of the facts a humble assessment of who

[24 : 54] Jesus is and what he accomplished by his death and resurrection I mean just think about it for a moment every religious leader who has ever lived has been buried in a grave and the tombs of those where we know they've been buried have become places of worship but they're dead Jesus is alive risen from the dead ascending back to heaven from where he will return at the end of history as laws and judge and so we worship him in fact I think the evidence is so persuasive that actually and I hope you don't mind me putting it like this to deny the resurrection really I think means you have to be evasive you have to ignore the evidence of history you have to ignore the invitation of friends to consider the claims of Jesus you almost

I think have to invent reasons for not believing in Jesus and you have to think of excuses why now is not the time to take Jesus seriously and to consider his claims that's the first implication the resurrection changes the future but secondly the resurrection changes the present Joseph of Arimathea notice he's been set free from the idols of this world he's an important man people know who he is and yet he's publicly aligned himself with Jesus he's happy to give up his tomb his riches are completely at Jesus disposal here is a man who has been set free as for the women they have been transformed they now know that they have eternal life they are full of joy the rest of the disciples why we'll see next week they are given a commission to take the message of Jesus to the nations at which point they know that they have indeed the best news in the world and their life is purposeful the resurrection of Jesus changes the present it changes today it changes our life our lives for those of us who know and trust him lives of freedom lives of joy lives of purpose let me lead us in prayer and behold

Jesus met with them and said greetings and they came up and took hold of his feet and worshipped him heavenly father we praise you for this momentous day in history we praise you that you raised the lord Jesus from the dead never to die again we praise you for these facts of history that we can see 2000 years later we praise you the message of Jesus and the forgiveness of sins has been proclaimed through history and to the nations thank you for new life you give to all those who trust in him for the forgiveness of sins for knowing you as our heavenly father in both this world and the next a life of freedom and joy and purpose and we pray heavenly father please would you increase our confidence in the lord Jesus and our great love for him as we seek to live for him this week and we ask it in his name amen