

EASTER DAY - Does Easter Matter?

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[0 : 00] Please be seated. You may like to have open the Bibles at page 935, the first Bible reading from 1 Corinthians chapter 15 on page 935 in the Pew Bibles.

Well, here we all are, some people who come once or twice a year, others week by week, crowded into the church, does it really matter? Are we really here for something that matters?

Let's pray. God, our Heavenly Father, we pray that you'll speak to us through the words of the Bible this morning. We thank you that you are a God who reveals himself and does so in these words of Scripture.

So, open our hearts and our minds and our wills to them that we may be informed, reformed and transformed in faith and in obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Mummy, what happens when we die? No doubt many of you have asked that question, many of you have been asked it, either by a child or a grandchild or someone else.

[1 : 14] I wonder what sort of answer you would give. I remember when I asked that sort of question when I was little, being given an answer along the lines of, well, when you die, your soul or spirit goes up to heaven and the body just sort of decays in the ground or after cremation or whatever.

Some people, depending on their tradition, they might say, well, when you die, you come back in something else. You might be lucky to come back in a person who is rich and famous or perhaps you'll come back as a frog or a weed or something like that.

Some might say that when you die, your spirit or soul just sort of floats off into a nirvana, bodiless existence of some sort. And it seems to me these days that even agnostics and atheists, people who don't really give much credence to the existence of God, seem to think or at least hope or wish for some sort of spirit, ongoing existence after death.

I mean, how often did we hear it after the murder of David Hooks that somehow Hooksy was still looking down on the Victorian cricket team? It's very common, I find, at funerals, people to say something like, their spirit still lives on in some way or other.

We see it in films of recent times, The Sixth Sense or Ghost or Truly Madly Deeply. Even in the film Titanic at the end with that Celine Dion song, somehow expressing the hope or wish or belief maybe that the spirit of Jack Dawson might keep on lingering on.

[2 : 51] And often at this time of year, even some Christian theologians come out and say, well, the resurrection of the body is not really the thing, it's really just the spirit will live on and the influence of Jesus on his disciples and so on.

This is a little bit exceptional, it seems to me. I suspect that Mel Gibson's film has sort of shifted the focus onto Jesus dying rather than his rising, so we don't have the usual articles that I've seen anyway with people debunking the resurrection of Jesus that it's just a spirit existence.

Well, in the end, does it really matter? Is this an important issue or is it trivial? Is belief in Easter essential?

Is anything lost by denying the bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead? Who really needs a resurrection? Well, the view that the spirit or soul lives on and is immortal is a very old view, predating Jesus' era.

It goes back at least to Greek philosophy, Plato, for example, that the soul is immortal and the Greeks believed one of then two things. If the soul is immortal but the body is just temporary, either then you deny the body in preparation for your soul-spirit existence, that was the Stoic view, the Stoic philosophy view, or if the body is temporal, the spirit lives on, then indulge the body.

[4 : 14] You might as well eat as much chocolate and hot cross buns as you like because the body will just die and rot in the grave, it's the spirit that matters. That's the Epicurean philosophic view of

Greeks. Paul is writing here to a church in ancient Greece, a church in a place called Corinth.

There's still a town in Greece today. And some of these Christians are in this dilemma of having heard the Christian message, but because of their influence of Greek philosophy and Greek thinking, they don't really think there is a resurrection of the body.

The soul is forever, that's all that matters. Seems to be the dilemma that these Christians were facing. And what follows in the passage that was read for us from 1 Corinthians 15 is a fairly strident attack on the view that the resurrection of the body is nonsense or doesn't happen or is irrelevant. It matters, it seems, from this passage at least. Verse 12 of chapter 15 begins with Paul saying, if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, and that's exactly what he's been doing for the last 11 verses, then how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead?

That is, their Greek philosophy is still part of their system. They haven't quite worked out that their Greek philosophy is wrong. Paul is arguing that the resurrection is right and he's saying that your view clashes with what he's just been saying about Jesus risen from the dead.

[5 : 41] Now, Paul says to this church to whom he writes, if you are right, verse 13, if there is no resurrection of the Christ, then the logic is that Christ has not been raised.

Now, the consequence, if Christ has not been raised, is significant. It's not a trivial matter. He says then in verse 14, if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain.

Two consequences. Paul's preaching is a waste of time if Jesus is not risen and their faith is a waste of time if Jesus has not risen.

His preaching would be useless, in vain, empty or worthless. As he goes on to say in verse 15, he'd even be misrepresenting God because we testified of God that he raised Christ but he wouldn't have raised Christ if it's true that the dead are not raised.

So, Paul is saying our preaching would be absolutely worse than worthless. It would be lies because if preaching Jesus raised from the dead is not in fact true, then he's actually misrepresenting God.

[6 : 53] Consequently, what the Corinthians believed from his preaching would also be lies, a pack of lies. Now, you might think, well, Paul's getting a bit sort of, getting a bit excited here, I mean the Apostle Paul, and getting a bit excited here about something.

Does this really matter? Is this really so crucial? Is the resurrection that significant? After all, the symbol of Christianity from early times is a cross, not an empty tomb.

People don't walk around with empty tomb jewellery and pendants around their neck. You don't see an empty tomb at the front of a church or on the spire of a church. It's a cross. So, if the cross is what matters and Jesus died on the cross, well, maybe the resurrection, the follow-up event a couple of days later, maybe that's of secondary importance.

Is anything really lost if the resurrection's untrue? Does it really matter? I mean, we might say that Jesus' teaching still stands. There's lots of profound and wise things there.

If he didn't rise from the dead, we've still got his teaching. And if he didn't rise from the dead, we've still got his miracles and they are fairly impressive. And there's a lot of good morality and ethics about how to live that Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount and other places.

[8 : 06] We've still got that if he didn't rise from the dead. So, maybe the resurrection doesn't quite matter. Well, Paul continues his argument in this passage in 1 Corinthians 15.

In verse 17, he says again, if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile. It's ineffective. It's placed in the wrong thing. It's in effect what he's saying here.

But worse than that, the end of verse 17 says, and you are still in your sins. That is, your sins are not forgiven. You've not been made right with God.

You are still guilty for failing to love God and failing to love your neighbour as yourself. So, what's the connection then between our sins and Jesus rising from the dead?

For many of us would readily think and say, Jesus dying on a cross deals with our sins, once and for all. So, where then does the resurrection have a role to play in this?

[9 : 10] If Jesus is not risen from the dead, either of two things is the case. Either it means that Jesus is not perfect, so he dies as a sinner, hence he doesn't rise, or else his death is insufficient for the sins of the world.

It doesn't actually atone for the sins of the world as Jesus claimed it would. See, it's not enough for the spirit of Jesus to just live on, to be a bit of an influence in people's lives.

The bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ is essential part of the forgiveness and atonement of sins. You see, if Jesus is not risen from the dead, then the cross of Christ does not bring forgiveness. Our sins are not atoned for, either because Jesus was a sinner or because his death was insufficient. Either way, we remain in sin.

If Jesus did not rise from the dead, sin is not atoned for. And for those who've already died in Christ, that is those who've already died as Christians, Paul says in verse 18, they've perished.

[10:27] They've placed their faith in Jesus, they're now dead and there's no life beyond the grave for them. They've perished in their sins. Death has kept its sting.

So, this is quite important to grasp here. Quite a lot seems to hang on this argument of the resurrection mattering, at least at the promise of eternal life in heaven sin and sin being atoned for. You see, the resurrection of Jesus, when God raised Jesus up from the grave, bodily, physically, visibly, demonstrates clearly that the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross was sufficient and acceptable to atone for our sins, to bring us forgiveness for our failure to live up to God's perfect standards. Deny the resurrection and we deny the effectiveness of the cross. But it doesn't stop there either. You've probably seen at some point or other on TV those attempts at the Guinness Book of Records, the dominoes.

You know those sorts of things where people set up hundreds of thousands of dominoes all standing in great sort of convoluted patterns and so on and then at the top of the pile they flip one and all those dominoes begin to fall and you get these magnificent pictures and sculptures and all sorts of things laid out before you, hundreds of thousands of them.

[11:52] I hope you've seen and understand at least what I'm referring to. In a similar way the resurrection of Jesus is like the first domino. If you flip it every single other significant part of the Christian faith falls if the resurrection didn't happen.

Every key doctrine and practice of Christians and churches falls down if the resurrection of Jesus did not occur.

Let me briefly give you some illustrations. If the resurrection of Jesus didn't happen there is no life after death because we'd be dead in our sins and Jesus would be dead in a Palestinian grave somewhere.

If he is dead he didn't rise bodily from the dead then he's not coming back and that's a key part of Christian hope and expectation that one day at the end of history Jesus will return and when he returns he will come to judge the world for our sins and so if he's dead and still dead and he's not coming back then he's not coming to judge us and there's no judgement.

Now you might think as I do sometimes that would be very pleasant that we wouldn't be accountable before God on judgement day but the flip side of that is that if there is no judgement then there is in the end no morality no ethic we can do what we like it doesn't matter because part of the significance of Christian behaviour and obedience is that one day we will stand before the judgement of God what we do who we are matters but if Jesus is not coming to judge because he's dead still then what we do doesn't matter might as well do what we like also if Jesus is not risen from the dead then at least the New Testament of the Bible would be torn out and thrown away and several parts of the Old Testament that look forward to the New would clearly be torn out and thrown away because it keeps telling us that Jesus is risen from the dead so in the end the Bible becomes totally unreliable the world's bestseller is gone and if Jesus is still dead and not risen from the dead then there's no point praying because Christians know very well that we pray to God the

[14:10] Father through Jesus who lives who's risen from the dead and ascended to heaven and is at the right side of the Father it's he who's made the connection and opened the door so that our prayers go to God but if Jesus is still dead in a grave somewhere in the Middle East then our prayers will find a closed door in heaven they will not get through so give up praying if he's not risen from the dead and therefore we throw out our Anglican prayer books which many people would like to do but some people wouldn't but there's no point in having them if Jesus is not risen from the dead moreover we throw out our hymn books as well because other than the hymns that clearly and explicitly speak about Jesus being alive and risen and Lord and Saviour there aren't many hymns left really when you take all of those inferences and explicit statements out so we might as well throw out the hymn books as well and in fact there'd be no modern Christian songs let alone old Christian songs all the church music of the centuries that has thrilled people's ears is really just nonsense a waste of time furthermore we'd have no preaching some of you might like that and let me tell you there are plenty of times when I'd like that too not least on a

Saturday night but preaching would be nonsense why bother if he's not risen from the dead but you see baptism would be a nonsense as well this afternoon we're baptising five adults from our Chinese congregation tonight we're baptising two adults and a baby from our evening service congregation well I'd be telling them save the water because why be baptised we baptise into the body of Christ trusting in a risen and living saviour but if he's dead then who'd want to be baptised into a dead corpse rather than a living body so baptism would go as well in fact the Lord's Supper would go because even though it points back to Jesus dying for us the wine and the bread are symbols of his death for us his life or body given for us it proclaims his death until he comes but moreover because we'd be still in our sins what's the point of this fellowship meal because it's actually telling us that our sins are forgiven so we'd scrap the Lord's Supper as well so we've got rid of church more or less the church is called the body of

Christ but if he's dead it's just a corpse so church doesn't really exist so we've got rid of preaching hymns we've got rid of the Lord's Supper and baptism why bother coming we might as well take the building down and given that our name is Holy Trinity and if Jesus is dead he can hardly be divine then the Holy Trinity is a nonsense and you're left not with the Father and the Spirit but the Spirit of Jesus would be dead too if Jesus is dead so you haven't got much of God left you see take out the resurrection of Jesus and all the rest of it falls there is nothing left of worth in the Christian faith nothing left of value nothing left of importance it's nonsense it's a domino faith in a sense at its heart is the resurrection of Jesus from the dead take it away and in the end there is nothing left Paul says at the conclusion of this paragraph if for this life only we have hoped in Christ we are of all people most to be pitied and so is it true if Jesus didn't rise from the dead we are pitiable people our world would pity us for being such fools forgiving ourselves even just for an hour on a Sunday morning let alone all the other

Christian activities and our faith and our hope nonsense waste of time if the resurrection is untrue the resurrection is untrue Christianity is a complete delusion or sham you can't take away the resurrection and still have a body of Christian faith and belief and practice that is worthwhile it's nonsense it's rubbish it's deceitful you see the resurrection of Jesus matters you can't deny the resurrection and be a Christian you can't deny the resurrection and have anything of Christian value left it all falls apart what begs the question then did he really rise well yes he did the evidence for that is almost irrefutable certainly overwhelming beyond reasonable doubt the grave was empty the same grave the women went to on the Friday night they went back to on the Sunday morning they knew the grave it was guarded it was empty the body had gone it may have been stolen some say by the Jews or the Romans to try and sort of quell the worship of

Jesus but surely when they saw the spread of Christianity within the first few weeks they'd have brought a body back but no they didn't because they couldn't it was risen and the disciples they would hardly have taken the body under guard anyway because later on those same disciples Peter James Paul Stephen others were put to death for their belief in the resurrection now what a fool that would be to say I believe in the resurrection to know that I'd be put to death for saying that when all the time I took the body and knew he didn't rise what an idiot should be locked up but those disciples weren't idiots they knew he'd risen because it wasn't just an empty tomb they saw him they talked with him they ate with him he was in an upper room with them he walked on a road to Emmaus with a couple of them they had breakfast on a beach he appeared to 500 not an hallucination or a ghost he said to Thomas touch my hands he's really risen the body's risen not just a spirit not just an influence not just an inspiration but the same

[20 : 04] Jesus crucified dead really dead has risen from the dead of that there can be really no doubt in the end the evidence for that event in history is more substantial than for any other event in ancient history is the resurrection of Jesus that keeps me going as a Christian I remember in 1985 suffering glandular fever and being unwell for about five months during which time not able to do much feeling fairly depressed and sorry for myself much of the time and really quite tempted in a way to give up on Christian faith the one thing that kept me going as a Christian well not Christian friends or nice people or anything like that it was knowing being convinced Jesus was alive and risen and I could not overcome that fact you see primarily

I'm standing here today not because I'm paid to do this I could get paid better doing other jobs I'm not here primarily today because I like singing hymns and songs though I do but that's not the primary reason I'm standing here nor is it the primary reason that I'm standing here because of all you nice people either I mean you may be nice but it's not primarily why I'm here I'm not here for a

spiritual pick me up I think I get more of that perhaps lying in bed sleeping in on a Sunday morning sometimes I'm here today because Jesus is alive that's the primary reason that every Sunday I'm here and most Sundays preaching it's why I'm a minister but more importantly it's why I'm a Christian it's why I remain a Christian because Jesus is alive and if somebody was to show me irrefutable evidence that in fact he is dead and didn't rise then I would take off this silly plastic collar I would never put it on I walk out of this building and never go into a church again I would have nothing absolutely what to do with Christianity or Christians because it is absolute rubbish unless he rose but he did and our sins are forgiven our hope is real Jesus lives and so it is worth singing the hymns and being baptized and celebrating the Lord's Supper and it is worth praying it is worth hoping for eternal life because they're all sure good and worthwhile things because Jesus lives and that is what we believe and our faith is not in vain a world has no need to pity us because he lives and so far from being absolute nonsense and rubbish because Jesus is risen it is the most important thing in world history it's the most important thing that any one of us can ever do is to trust in the risen Lord Jesus Christ as our Saviour and as our Lord you see there's no middle ground it is either nonsense to be rejected totally or it is of fundamental importance whoever we are wherever we are and it's the latter because he rose and because he lives hallelujah you you you you