

THE GREATEST STORY EVER TOLD

[Part 5 – Resurrection]

We have now reached the point in ‘The Greatest Story Ever Told’ where we consider the resurrection of The Lord Jesus Christ > And I want to divide this into 3 parts:

- **Resurrection > Wow!**
- **Resurrection > What?**
- **Resurrection > So what?**

1. Resurrection > Wow!

That is the discovery of the resurrection of Jesus.

It’s Sunday, very early, still dark and that summarises where the disciples are at this point.

It’s that day of the funeral kind of feeling > Where we go through empty rituals and duties but there are no goals anymore.

John 20 : 1

Mary comes to the tomb > But not alone, as we might think from reading the account in John > The synoptic gospels make it clear that other women are with her.

They discover the tomb open > The great stone that was rolled in front of the tomb has been rolled back.

What has happened?

Clearly they look in, or at least one of them does, and reports that the body has gone > And there is panic.

Is this the last twist of the knife on the part of the authorities? > To take away His body? Or is it grave robbers?

V 2

They run to Peter, who despite his denials is still the respected leader > John comes and they run to the tomb:

V 4 – 8

Peter goes away wondering; John sees and believes > This is the usual word in the NT for faith and so we can take it that at the very least John believes that Jesus is risen.

Clearly the state of the tomb is what awakened that conviction.

There is no sign of plunder here > This is not a grave robbery > This is all peace and calm.

Quite arguably the strips which would have been wound round the body, packed with spices, are now lying as if still encircling Jesus' body > And the head turban still entwined as if round Jesus' head.

John Stott put it like this:

'What John saw was like a discarded chrysalis from which the butterfly has emerged'

John had been at the tomb of Lazarus and had seen him resuscitated > But he was held by the grave clothes and he had to be let out.

Jesus on the other hand has no grave clothes > He is clothed in His new humanity and He is not held back.

John sees, and wonder breaks upon him > This is not resuscitation, it's resurrection!

He doesn't have full faith about it yet:

V 9

He hasn't quite got to saying '**He had to rise**' > That would come later > But he knows enough to believe.

V 10 – 11

Think of what Mary had been through in the last few hours > Having been at the cross, and all the horror of that.

Then coming to the tomb to perform the final rites that Sunday morning > To mourn, and continue the work of embalming > But now even that had been taken away from her.

Maybe there's anxiety in her heart > Luke's gospel tells us that, she had been delivered by Jesus, demons had been cast from her, and now Jesus was gone.

What was the prospect of her retaining that new freedom?

What about the possibilities of a re-invasion of the darkness?

She is a very distraught woman and as she looks into the tomb she:

V 12 – 13 > Crying?

From the perspective of heaven tears are so utterly inappropriate > If there is any time in history where tears are less appropriate, it's at the empty tomb of Jesus.

It's a place for singing, dancing, celebration > And she is weeping > Why?

V 13 They > 14

She was so cocooned in her grief that she can't focus on Jesus.

V 15 – 16

One word, '**Mary**' > That remakes her world; She's running and embracing Him, but Mary can't cling to Jesus > There are new dimensions for Him, and for her.

This 'Good News' has got to be shared:

V 17

And then she's off; the church's first evangelist:

V 18

She comes to the disciples but then, she's a woman, so they don't believe > Here they are in this upper room, still locked in from fear of the Jews.

Then the glory of Easter breaks upon them:

V 19 – 20

A ghost doesn't have flesh; This is real, it's resurrection.

The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord > And part of the joy in that moment surely was fed out of their experience of the Temple liturgy, which is wonderfully reflected in the motion and action of Jesus.

In the liturgy, that great day of Atonement was the occasion, once a year, when the High Priest would go into the Holy of Holies, behind the veil, to cast that blood upon the Mercy Seat to make atonement for the all people.

All the courts would throng with worshippers, and at the high point of the worship the High Priest would take the sacrifice and disappear from view behind the veil.

A hush would come upon the people > Would the sacrifice be acceptable? Would God affirm them and express atonement for their sins?

Then after a pause, suddenly the curtain would tremble and The High Priest would reappear and cry his greeting: **'Shalom! Peace! Peace with God.'**

Our great High Priest offers on that cross His one full complete sufficient sacrifice in atonement for the sin of the world.

He is buried; He is hidden; Is He accepted?

Suddenly the curtain trembles and He is there among them: **'Shalom! Peace!'**

Oh the wonder of it, Our sin – Not the part but the whole – He has carried to the cross > That's part of the joy that was theirs and it's ours as Jesus meets us with those same words: **'Peace be with you'**.

Thomas wasn't there, but a week later he was:

V 26 – 28

Thomas responds the only way you can respond to the reality of Easter **'My Lord and my God'**.

It's Resurrection > Wow!

2. We come to Resurrection > What?

John understands this is an actual event > A specific location at a datable point in history.

It's not a myth > The tomb is empty, the disciples can touch Him, and they can place their fingers in His wounds.

But there is something more than normal history here > This is the sovereign action of God breaking gloriously into history.

This is more than the normal historical experience > Not less.

While John and the other evangelists are not setting out to prove the resurrection [They are more concerned with its implications theologically and personally] > Yet their accounts contain clear evidence that persuasively supports the Resurrection.

What is this evidence?

Well in this chapter we have the empty tomb > Jesus' body has gone; It's virtually impossible to deny that.

In a few days time these same apostles bear witness to the resurrection in Jerusalem.

When Peter stood on the Day of Pentecost, he was in Jerusalem > A matter of just a few hundred yards from the tomb of Jesus > And as he preached he homed in on the resurrection:

Acts 2 : 29

By contrast, Jesus' tomb we have also, but it has no tenant.

V 30 – 33

How did Peter and the other apostles persuade those in Jerusalem of the reality of the resurrection – The very central plank of their witness – Unless that tomb was empty?

Quite simply the resurrection could not have been maintained in Jerusalem for a single hour, let alone a single day, if the emptiness of the tomb had not been established for all concerned.

For the Jew, resurrection meant a grave-emptying business.

Of course some say that the disciples must have stolen the body > But that flies in the face of the gospel accounts.

There's a beautiful sincerity in the record, no hint of a fabrication.

They were not expecting the resurrection, didn't accept the testimony of the females, and they were hiding out of fear for their lives > And yet these same disciples died for this thing – Sometimes excruciatingly.

There is not a hint anywhere in the succeeding years of any diminished commitment to the resurrection by the apostles.

This was no 'Passover Plot' that they put together and then had to hang on to right to the bitter end.

They were fully convinced that the Resurrection had taken place and were prepared to die for their resurrected Lord > Which wouldn't have been the case if they had stolen the body.

Now what about the authorities?

As the disciples began to witness, and they were embarrassingly successful in Jerusalem, these authorities would have given anything for any evidence to deflate the whole movement.

In Acts chapter 4, Peter and John are before them and the authorities want to stop this thing > And what do they say?

The best they can come with is **'Stop ok!'**

If ever there was a company in history who had access to all the evidence of where Jesus' body was > To point it out, or to give evidence of where it had been disposed, it was them!

They were in a far better position than any sceptical scholar in the 21st century > Yet they do not come up with that evidence.

Why?

Because it wasn't there > It never was and never would be.

Jesus was raised.

Then we go to some of His appearances > First to Mary, so authentic > Then to these disciples and onto Thomas.

There was no question about these things.

Professor Jim Dunn from Durham University said:

'It is virtually impossible to dispute that at the historical roots of Christianity lie experiences of the first Christians who understood them as appearances of Jesus raised from the dead'.

If hallucination will not fit the evidence, and it doesn't, then again we've come to the same place > Jesus is raised!

Then there's the transformation of the disciples > How are these frightened sheep huddled in that room at of fear suddenly to become these bold lions, taking on the whole nation in Acts chapter 2 ?

Yes the HS came, but it's evident a transformation occurred before that > The only thing that fits is the resurrection.

You know it's impossible to explain without the resurrection.

Then there's the existence of the church and the NT.

If Christ had not been raised there'd have been no Christian church for 2000 years to hand down the witness of this conviction > It simply would never have got off the ground.

And the Bible you've got in front of you > Reach to the middle of it and divide off the OT from the New with your fingers.

There would be none of the NT if Jesus were not raised from the dead > The message of a resurrected Jesus and a community of the resurrection would have been insane if it's authors knew it to be complete fabrication.

Christ is risen and this is a day for dancing.

G K Chesterton was once criticised by an agnostic friend for maintaining his Christian faith in the modern world.

The argument was depressingly familiar: **'Surely you can't hold to that kind of belief in this contemporary scientific world'**

To which Chesterton replied **'My good sir, far from disbelieving I'm actually prancing with belief!'**

We are prancing with belief, because Jesus is raised from the dead.

3. Resurrection > So What?

So what follows from all this?

We can look at this under 3 headings:

- **Implications for ourselves**
- **Implications for the Church**
- **And implications for Jesus**

And we'll take them in that order although that's the reverse order in which they occur in the chapter.

a. Implications for ourselves

John 20 : 29

We are those who have believed though we have not seen > We have believed the written testimony:

V 31

The glorious implication that is being stated by John here as far as the resurrection is concerned for our lives personally is:

We share the resurrection.

If you are a Christian you have been planted in union with Christ, in His death, and raised up with Him in new life.

The resurrection life that flowed through Jesus is now flowing within us.

We have been raised with Christ and that by believing.

But believing is sometimes a little difficult and that's why I think we've been given this whole story of Thomas > There's nothing perfect in this world and faith itself is not always straightforward.

Doubts arise for all of us at different times as they did for Thomas > It's something to bring into the open and not be ashamed about acknowledging.

'Lord I believe, help my unbelief' is the cry of the Christian heart at times.

With Thomas one of the contributory factors to his doubt, and of ours too, was isolation.

Jesus met the disciples but Thomas wasn't there > Perhaps true to his temperament, he was the kind of guy that had to be alone after the crucifixion, work it all out in his mind > But he missed the meeting.

As a preacher, I want to tell you that I don't compose sermons for particular people > That's not the aim.

But, as I seek a word from God, again and again, as a message is prepared I get a wonderful sense of who this is going to be really helpful to.

And then I come to church, rejoicing in anticipation of the way they're going to be blessed by this message, only to look out from the podium and find that the chair is empty.

It's not only discouraging for the preacher, it's devastating to the disciple.

How many messages that God had ready to bless you with and you weren't there.

I know we can't always be in church every week, but sometimes the reasons we are not here are trivial.

We need to learn the lesson Thomas learned on that 2nd weekend > Even though he's struggling with all kinds of doubts and they're infuriating him, he is there and Jesus comes, and he goes away blessed.

Let's not forsake the assembling of ourselves together, for when we meet as a body, Jesus comes and meets with us.

Jesus was there for Thomas when he was in pain and doubting > He will also be there for us in our pain and doubts.

Now you may say: ‘ **Isn’t that a bit emotional, this personal encounter stuff?**’

But it’s not emotional > It’s logic!

If Jesus rose from the dead, then that means He is alive always > Death can’t hold Him.

If He is alive always, He’s alive today, here and now, and we can meet Him > That’s not emotional slush, it’s cold logic.

Thomas meets with Him and his doubts are addressed > And Jesus meets us at the point of our need as we trust and reach out to Him > And our needs are addressed.

Then there is that command at the end: ‘**Stop doubting and believe**’.

Sometimes we need to hear that summons to believe.

G K Chesterton talked about doubts about doubt > And we need to doubt our doubts.

Believe our beliefs, cast ourselves on to Jesus and discover His reality and the renewal of faith.

Then the summit of faith as Thomas makes his marvellous confession: ‘**My Lord and my God**’.

This in a way completes the gospel of John > It began with the confession of an Apostle saying:

‘In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God’.

Now another Apostle is saying:

‘My Lord and my God’.

A doubter is the one who crowns the gospel of belief.

b. Implications for the Church

John 20 : 19 – 23

Notice 2 things about the mission:

First: ‘**As the Father has sent me, I am sending you**’ > It’s a mission patterned on the mission of Jesus.

Resurrection inevitably leads to mission.

And notice it's the same day > Jesus doesn't even give them any hours to reflect on the glory of the Resurrection > He is already indicating that they've got to go for Him.

It's a mission of the One who became incarnate and our mission needs equally to be incarnated in the world:

Jesus' ministry cared for the hungry, feeding the 5,000 for example, and in our world:

- **20% are hungry**
- **8% are starving**
- **60,000 dying a day**
- **40,000 of them children**

Then there's sickness; Jesus ministered to the sick.

Just think of HIV/AIDS > The figures are staggering.

The deaths from AIDS are now about as many as died in all the wars in the 20th century.

In South Africa, 22% of the population are thought to be infected > In Botswana it's 40%.

Just apply that to your own community > That's what they are facing and there's a disproportionate distribution of resources and medicines.

And what about the ignorant?

There are 1 billion people in our world with no access to real education.

Then there is the most deprived people on the planet, those who have never heard of Jesus > The unevangelised.

About 2 billion because of the walls of culture and prejudice > 10,000 people groups of our world with no viable church.

Jesus is sending us to be His witnesses and this is part of what Easter means when applied to us.

And second there are the resources: Jesus talks of the HS > He is the great resource.

Here Jesus is preparing them for this great gift > For the HS is the breath of the risen Jesus, the life of the risen Lord flowing into our lives and enabling us for all the demands of mission.

c. The implications of the resurrection for Jesus

V 9

This speaks of the Biblical witness to the resurrection > All the prophetic writings that anticipated that.

But as far as Jesus Himself is concerned the key is in:

V17

'I am ascending' is a better translation than **'I am returning'** for resurrection is a moment in the movement of exaltation for Jesus.

He is on His way to the right hand of the Father > It is because the tomb is empty, that the Throne is occupied.

Jesus is LORD!

That is His witness.

He can say: **'All authority is given to Me in heaven and earth'** > The early church bore witness to that with joy.

Peter said on the day of Pentecost **'God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ'**.

Stephen, as he died, is given the vision of the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God > This is the Jesus we meet and worship.

Not the One who will be Lord one day [though that is wonderfully true > We will see Him on His throne when He returns] > But One who is already exalted at God's right hand.

Let me give you 2 illustrations of this as I finish:

In the year 160 AD in the city of Smyrna, under the pro-consulship of **Sta tius Quad ratus**, the aged Polycarp, bishop of the church, is brought to trial during a local persecution.

He is called upon to curse the name of Jesus, but he makes this marvellous reply:

'Fourscore and six years have I served Him and He never did me wrong. How can I revile my King, my Saviour?'

So they burned him to death in the amphitheatre.

But the young church in Smyrna hurled its defiance in the very face of his murderers > For when it later came to write down in the annals of the church where it happened, they very carefully entered the precise date and gave it like this:

‘Polycarp was murdered. Sta tius Quad ratus being pro-consul in Asia and Jesus Christ being King forever’.

That’s the faith > He is the Lord!

The spirit of this is captured so beautifully by TS Elliot in his play **‘Murder in the Cathedral’**.

As the priests bar the door of the great church of Canterbury against the would be assassins, Thomas the Archbishop, knowing they have done it for his safety will not permit it.

He says: **‘Throw open the doors. I will not have the house of prayer, the church of Christ, the sanctuary, turned into a fortress. The church shall be open even to our enemies.’**

The priests protest, they are desperate, and say:

‘You would bar the door against the lion, the leopard, the wolf or the boar, why not more against beasts with the souls of damned men and against men who damn themselves to beasts, my lord?’

His answer rings out loud and clear:

‘We have fought the beast and conquered > Now is the triumph of the cross. Now open the door I command it’.

That is the faith > He has conquered > He is Lord.

In His Name we go to the world.

There is the **‘Wow’** of Easter!

Jesus is risen > Here is the **‘What’** > It’s historically verified > It is true.

And here is the **‘So What’**:

- **For ourselves individually > We share His risen life**
- **For our Church corporately > We go to mission to the world**
- **And for Jesus personally > He is Lord of all!**

Christ is Risen > He is Risen indeed > Hallelujah!