

On the third day he rose again

All the clauses of this statement speak of beliefs which are absolutely vital to the Christian faith, but none more so than this clause. After all, why should we believe yet another man claiming to be God's Son? People claiming to be the Messiah were ten-a-penny in Jesus' day, wandering teachers and miracle workers hardly less so. Why believe this man and not the others. Especially when so much of what he said contradicted orthodox received teaching of the day. Why believe all these incredible stories about a special birth. Such stories grew up around other important figures in the Jewish religion (especially Moses) and were not unknown in the pagan world either. Why believe his death to be a victory, when it appeared an obvious defeat? And why are we still keeping this man's memory alive more than 2000 years later when all the other Messianic claimants are forgotten? The answer is: the Resurrection. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead changed everything, because it brought about three things:

1. An altered judgement

Jewish and Roman authorities condemned Jesus as a blasphemer and a rebel leader. Jesus died the typical death of a condemned criminal of the lowest sort, which is what the society he lived in believed him to be. Men judged that his claim to be the Son of God bringing God's message, power, and love to a needy world was a lie. His teaching diverged widely from that of the acknowledged leaders of the faith. At times, he even seemed to be going further than Scripture. He told the crowds that Moses had allowed divorce, but said it was only a concession to a sinful race. "But I tell you," he said, "anyone who divorces his wife except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery." (Matthew 5: 32) This was an implicit criticism of the Law of Moses as imperfect. He broke the Sabbath by performing healings. He welcomed sinners, outcasts, and even Gentiles. How could he be the Messiah? The Messiah was meant to be the one who would free Israel from foreign oppression and bring in God's rule on earth. This man shied away from all aggression, and submitted to death on a cross without a fight. He performed miracles. But Jewish tradition records the tales of other wandering rabbis of the period who were also known to perform miracles. The Romans saw him as a troublemaker who could inflame the passions of the people. Maybe he himself would not lead a rebellion. But maybe he could create the conditions in which someone else could mount a challenge to Roman rule. To all, he was just one more failed Messianic pretender, justly executed for his crimes.

But the resurrection changed all that! Like a heavenly Court of Appeal, God the Father dramatically reversed the human judgement in a way no Law Lord ever could – by bringing the condemned man back to life! By raising Jesus from the dead, God set his seal of approval on all Jesus said and did. His interpretations of Scripture, so unorthodox at the time, must be God's interpretations. All of Scripture, all of history, before or since, needs to be seen in the light of what this man said and did. He must be the Son of God. His miracles must be the real thing. He must be the Lord and Master of all – of the world and of the individual lives of every person. Because he came back to life! Something so unbelievable on the surface becomes the absolute truth by which all other truth is judged, because God brought this man back to life.

2. An amazing victory

The second thing the resurrection achieved is an amazing victory over sin, over the forces of evil, and over death itself. Strictly speaking, the victory was won by Jesus atoning death on the cross (see “was crucified, died, and was buried”), but it was only revealed by the resurrection. On the first Good Friday, as Jesus hung on the cross, it appeared that his cause was lost; that all he had taught, all he had worked for and hoped for had come to nothing. In fact, the victory had been won. But the disciples did not feel very victorious. They felt defeated and dejected. In fact, the greatest weakness of the sceptical argument against the resurrection is its inability to answer the question as to how such publicly humiliated and thoroughly dejected people as Jesus’ disciples could, three days after their Master’s death be joyful witnesses, and be prepared to testify to that faith even under the threat of death. And it is a fact that most of the apostles died martyrs’ deaths. How did that happen? I have witnessed people having hallucinations and delusions in my time as a mental health chaplain. But it was always plain that these *were* hallucinations and delusions. I know of no hallucination that has taken over the mind of so many people and lasted so long as this one. Sometimes deluded people manage to gather followers who believe them. And sometimes, like James Jones, they manage to persuade those people to die with them. But these delusions do not normally last for very long, and certainly do not outlive their originator. These people were absolutely convinced they had seen their Lord. They believed they had seen him eat, so he was no ghost. Even one man (Saul of Tarsus) who was an orthodox Jew anxious to destroy the infant Jesus movement, believed he saw Jesus (after the resurrection) on the road to Damascus, where Saul was going to help wipe out the followers of Jesus there. This experience made of him the apostle Paul, the writer of much of the Christian scriptures.

This amazing event showed that the Cross had indeed been a victory over sin and the forces of evil. And the appearance of Jesus to his followers showed more graphically than anything that even death itself had been defeated. His followers could now rejoice that their sins had been forgiven, that eternal life was theirs, and that they were assured of a place in God’s heavenly kingdom in glory.

3. An abiding presence

But perhaps the most astounding effect of the Resurrection, is that it enabled Jesus to become eternally present to every believer. The earthly Jesus could be with only a few people for a limited time. The risen Jesus can be with every one of His people whenever they have need of Him. He is now outside of space and time, though he can appear to us in space and time. He is always with His people: watching, guiding, guarding, teaching, empowering. This is how it is possible for Jesus to inspire so many people so long after His time on earth. As the song says, every believer can testify: “You ask me how I know He lives? He lives within my heart!” He is present every minute of every day. And He fills us with the life of God. As Jesus himself said: “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies. And whoever lives and believes in me will never die.” (John 11:25-26) Christians believe in Jesus and follow him today, not just because they are intellectually convinced by the arguments for the reliability of the Biblical record the truth of Christian Doctrine. They believe because they know Jesus living in their hearts. Because they feel that they “abide in him and he in them” (John 15: 4-5). They are linked in the closest possible relationship. As St. Paul (formerly Saul of Tarsus) says: “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.

The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”

So then, what is to be our reaction? If Jesus is indeed risen from the dead, we need to drastically revise our judgement of Him. For us, he can no longer be just a “good man” or a “wise teacher” or a “teller of stories”, or even one of a raft of similar “holy men”. He must be the Son of God, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, and also the Lord and Master of our lives. The one to whom we owe everything, and whose will and direction we follow in everything. The one who is the aim and goal of our life and work. We must be prepared to give up everything to him, who gave up everything for us.