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Easter [C]

Sermon notes on

1 Corinthians 15.19

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Available from www.auburnuc.org.au and

www.kew.unitingchurch.org.au

The event we gather to recall each week – the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth – is that thing without which all that makes the church the church would fall away. It is the thing which we seek to express, or to experience, whenever we gather together in this way and read the scriptures, pray, preach, sing, meditate and share fellowship. Of course, the church as a social institution could run on almost indefinitely *without* this central reality – as perhaps most of the time in fact we do – but we would cease then to bear testimony to that which is our particular burden, and our particular privilege. For if Jesus is not raised (whatever it means to say that he was) then “Christian” ethics becomes merely our moral preferences or aspirations, liturgy becomes mere subjective aesthetics, fellowship becomes the free association of like-minded people, and a sermon, if you’re lucky, *might* be a profound reflection on something about human existence, but not much different from what a good novel might teach you, and certainly a whole lot less convenient.

And so if Jesus is not raised from the dead (*whatever* it means to say that he was) then, to quote Paul, we are the most to be pitied of all people (1 Corinthians 15.19) – pitied because of the extraordinary rigmarole we go through to achieve what more sensible people manage to achieve much more simply without the inconvenience of religious conviction.

Now, I’ve already qualified my references to the resurrection of Jesus this morning with the expression “whatever it means to say that he was [raised]”. In another sermon¹ I’ve argued that the question of whether the resurrection “really happened” is not one which serves us well because, unlike for the contemporaries of Jesus himself, it is not obvious today what I would have to do if I could be persuaded that it *did* occur. The answer doesn’t tell me what to do. And so it is, today, entirely possible that I could be convinced (perhaps, on the basis of the probabilities suggested by historical research) that Jesus did stop being dead, and at the same time that I would have no idea about what difference that should make to my life here and now.

In the church and out of it, we have become so fixed on the question of “what really happened” that we haven’t noticed that the very concept of resurrection has become *meaningless*, in that we no longer know “automatically” what the meaning of a risen corpse might be. And so, given that we’ve not got a “natural” (or cultural) sense of the meaning of a risen body, we’ve tended to worry simply about

the facticity or the historicity of the event – whether or not it actually happened. To put it differently, we are concerned today mainly with the resurrection as an event.

But this puts us quite out of step with the New Testament which is much more engaged with the resurrection as *effect*, as something which brings about a *change*. While the NT does have an interest in the resurrection as an event, it is only because it has *already* known the impact of the resurrection, and that impact is what might be called the “morality” of the resurrection.

Unlike we today who have no sense of what a resurrection might mean, resurrection was largely *expected* by many in Jesus’ time, and had a clear meaning linked to it. The question was not if, but *when*. So, “resurrection” as a divine miracle of the disruption of the “laws of nature”² is not the point of the story. The point of the story is that, most unexpectedly, it was *Jesus* who was raised, and not someone else. The main objection of the religious authorities to reports of Jesus’ resurrection would not have been that the dead cannot be raised but that *Jesus* in particular could not become what Paul came later to call “the firstborn of the dead”. For how could one who had been crucified *and so* apparently abandoned by God (Mark 15.34) be restored to life by that same God? The resurrection of Jesus was not a *scientific* impossibility in his context but a *religious* impossibility. This is surely very important in *our* contemporary cultural context, where nearly everyone who thinks he knows something about religion thinks that religion is all about life after death, so that debates about religion have to do with whether or not the dead could be raised.

(I have on my bookshelf at home a 500 page book called “The Physics of Immortality”, subtitled “Modern Cosmology, God and the Resurrection of the Dead”.³ I haven’t read it yet – and I’m much more interested in the physics than its attempt to be theological – but the blurb declares that the author presents a “purely scientific argument for the existence of God and the physical resurrection of the dead”. It is difficult to state just how much such an approach misses the point of the New Testament testimony, and just how similar its assumptions are to those of the anti-immortality camp.)

¹ Search out the link for the April 12 2009 sermon at www.auburnuc.org.au!

² “Laws of nature” being quite a recent way of thinking of “law” and “nature”.

³ Frank Tipler, *The physics of immortality*, Pan, London: 1995.

The New Testament is not particularly interested in the fact or otherwise of life after death; this is more or less assumed. But the New Testament is very interested in the question of who would deserve to be raised – and raised *first* – if there were such an afterlife. The force of the confession that Jesus was raised is not the event itself, but the significance of the fact that it *is Jesus* who is said to be raised. *Jesus is risen! Jesus is Lord!* These days most of us, most of the time, let the emphasis fall on the wrong side of the “is”, because we’re quite comfortable with the Jesus-side but need to whip up a bit of enthusiasm about the resurrection and the divinity bits.

If this is true, the unexpected outcome of all this is that, if we were to become more New Testament-like in our understanding of the resurrection, we would have to find Jesus an increasingly alien character, for “Jesus of Nazareth” and “firstborn from the dead” are contradictory names for the one person. To understand what talk of resurrection is getting at, and what Jesus presents to us, we have to learn to feel again the tension *within* the expression “Jesus is risen”, and not just the tension between that statement and modern science.

This is actually very difficult. Because we’re all (we “westerners”) either Christian or post(!)-Christian, we’ve already learned that Jesus is the good guy. Even a lot of atheists seem to like Jesus the sage, Jesus the teacher, the social justice activist.⁴ Of all people then, “of course”, it seems that *Jesus* would be raised (*if anyone* were going to be). Here the common moralism of believer and non-believer meet to dilute the gospel and render our attempts to understand useless, for everything is reduced to just as much as we can understand, without remainder. That is to say, if we miss the tension between “Jesus” and “risen” in the confession “Jesus is risen” then we condemn ourselves to learning nothing more about Jesus or resurrection than we think we already know. And it is only the dead who have nothing more to learn.

It is not going too far to say that, in fact, we *need* the story of the resurrection of Jesus because it keeps him strange – not because he is risen and we are not, but because, the story goes, it was a *surprise* to *everyone* present – friends (cf. John 20.9) and foes – that he was risen. We come to understand what the resurrection of Jesus signifies when we feel what Paul and the psalmist themselves felt – the utter shock that the heretic turned out to be the one which mattered, the stone which he (Paul), the builder, rejected, turned out to be the most important of all. This is not a “scientific” discovery, in the sense that we convince

ourselves that Jesus *could* have been raised, and it is not a religious one by which we grasp after resurrection out of fear of death. It is a discovery which simultaneously reveals to us the twin truths that “in Adam” we *have* been dead (1 Cor 15.22), but that “in Christ” we will be made alive.

It is when we can feel the tension of the statement “*Jesus is risen*” that we have placed ourselves in the shoes of the friends and the foes who stumble blindly through the pages of the gospels, until, at the very end, they begin to see, if only as through a glass darkly. The proclamation of the resurrection of Jesus is not a call to believe the unbelievable about something said to have happened to Jesus 2000 or so years ago. It is a call to believe something we might just begin to admit about ourselves but still need to be fully persuaded of – that we do not see very clearly who we are and where we are going.

The resurrection is light which not only drives the darkness back but reveals that it was there in the first place. It is prescription glasses for someone who should have had them years ago but didn’t realise that the blurry world she was seeing was not the real thing until the glasses revealed it as such. As such, the resurrection is what we desperately need if we are to know our selves and our world in their essence, and be healed. For the healing which this God brings is one which reveals just how wrong things really were going for us. Jesus, who we thought was just one of us – if just a little wiser and a little more tragic – is shown to be so much more and we to be so much less. And yet this is seen only after we, too, are made the same “so much more” as Jesus, now to look back on what we have left behind and to look forward only to the promise of life.

For this promise and the possibility that it might be realised for us in the good news of the resurrection of Jesus, all thanks and praise be to God, now and always. Amen.

⁴ One of the younger speakers at the recent atheist convention here in Melbourne creates short animations on the internet to make his anti-religious point. In one of them he has “Yahweh” – here the “God of the Old Testament” – wear a “What would Jesus do?” wristband to remind him (Yahweh) not to be so vengeful and bloodthirsty. For this atheist the sage Jesus serves as the moral reminder to God about how to behave.