

During the whole of this past week from Palm Sunday Maundy Thursday and Good Friday I have been painting a picture of what Jesus was on about by looking at his actions. Throughout this time we have seen that Jesus saw in himself the embodiment of the destiny of Israel. He was going to do for Israel what she could not do for herself, because she refused to acknowledge him as Messiah. As a result the nation and specifically the temple would come under judgement and he, Jesus would have to bring about salvation through himself.

So we saw on Palm Sunday how in coming into Jerusalem on a donkey he identified himself as a King, and by cleansing the temple passed judgement on it. We saw in the Last Supper and the cross how all this would work out, and how he would embody the reality of the exodus. He was the Passover lamb who would be slain for the sins of the world.

This is all very well and good but what about Resurrection? Were there any clues about this? Well, yes. In John we learn that Lazarus, his good friend has died. He goes to the family and Martha and Mary the sisters of Lazarus meet him. One of them says, Lord if you had been here, my brother would not have died. Jesus replied, your brother will rise on the last day.

This is a very odd response. If I did that to a great many bereaved people, I would not have many parishioners left after a period of time!!! Jesus seems to be saying to her, what are you worried about, it's only death. Martha replies, yes I know he will rise at the resurrection. Then Jesus hammers the point home. I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, even though they die they live, do you believe this? Jesus by his actions of raising Lazarus to life points to what is to come. But how does this work out?

The early Christians claimed very clearly that Jesus had been bodily raised from the dead. If they hadn't believed this there simply wouldn't have been an early church. People whose Messiahs got crucified slunk away home.

One also hears it said that the people of Jesus' day could easily believe in the resurrection because being pre modern people they simply did not know the laws of science. This is to completely misunderstand and to misinterpret what ancient people knew to be true and one of the things that they knew to be true was that dead people were not raised from the dead.

So the question that some one like Bp Tom Wright of Durham would ask is what does the language of resurrection mean for first century Jews, and from this we might start to get an understanding of what it means for us today.

One of the most profound images we have from the scriptures is the image of Ezekiel prophesying to the dry bones in the valley. This is faithless Israel who through their

sin has been cut off from God, is lifeless disconnected. The reconstituting of the nation of Israel through the prophetic word of God resurrects the nation and is a sign of hope for those in exile that the exile will end and they will return to God be his people and live in his land that he promised to them and they are now separated from through their sin and the judgment of the exile.

In the Maccabean crisis 200 years before Jesus as the Syrian King tortured the Jews for not obeying his blasphemous rules they believed that God would vindicate them and give them new bodies. This belief that God kept the righteous safe in his arms grew and was commonplace in the time of Jesus.

So although there was as there is today by the way a varied understanding of life after death if someone said resurrection it was the specific belief that God would raise the righteous dead, and maybe even the unrighteous dead would rise again to share in the kingdom of God and all that that might mean. When the Christians said that Jesus was raised from the dead this is what they were pointing to.

Skepticism of course crept in within minutes of the first people arriving at the tomb. Here are a few of the theories.

1. The women made it up. If you are a first century Jew the last person you want to be a witness is a woman. Females were not permitted to be witnesses, they were deemed unreliable. So when the women came and told the disciples the first skeptics was that august body of people called the disciples, the first leaders of the early church.
2. They visited the wrong tomb. Yes but somebody must have known where it was, and anyways they said that they found an alive Jesus.
3. The body was stolen. This was the spin put out by the authorities, and is just the sort of damage control we would expect from authorities both modern and ancient.
4. Doesn't fit our agenda. This is the position of Saul. He believed in resurrection, but if Jesus was raised then that would mean the turning upside down of his world view, and would radically change all things for him. This is exactly what happened.
5. They had an hallucination. Well ancient people new about hallucinations and had language for that. Any way a quick check on the tomb would have settled the debate once and for all.
6. He didn't really die. This one takes some believing that the Romans who were skilled in killing people, botched it. And in any case the gospel witness gives us the medical evidence for the death of Jesus in that in death the serum is separated out and the water and blood that issues from Jesus is the modern medical evidence that Jesus died. The disciples would not have then stood up in Jerusalem and proclaimed that the resurrection had occurred.

Modern skeptics have continued to deny the resurrection in many and varied ways, but they still have to account for the early church, which would not have been raised up if Jesus had not been raised from the dead because failed Messiah movements always collapsed on the death of the leader, or they got a new leader.

If Jesus had not been raised for the dead we could confidently say that this is what would have happened to Jesus' disciples, but it didn't. Even though James, Peter, and others were prominent leaders, they did not claim to be the new Messiah, Jesus was the only Messiah. But this can not really happen, because he was crucified, unless he really was raised from the dead.

The early church declared that resurrection had occurred in Jesus and that it was a bodily resurrection. If this is true than it means that the old order of the world of sin and death is at an end, and we can look forward with a new hope to the future.

The resurrection of Jesus tells us some important things.

1. The stigmata, that is the wounds of Christ tells us that the person Jesus who died is the one who stands before them in resurrection body. This means that the body is not abandoned. Because Jesus can go through locked doors it means that the body has new properties, and therefore that means that resurrection is not about resuscitation. This is important because it tells us that our bodies are good, that they are of intrinsic value to God, and are worth something. God takes Jesus all that he is and all that he was, all that he suffered and takes it and transforms it into something more wonderful and glorious than we can ever imagine. It means that God will take who we are, honor our lives all that we have done, and transform them into something more wonderful than we could ever imagine.

Our bodies will not be abandoned because in our bodies is something of our very being. These bodies are not a mistake to be sloughed off like a snake skin and to be discarded, but they are of intrinsic value to God because these are the bodies in which we have lived our life, good and bad, and in these bodies have we responded to God.

2. Following on from that resurrection and the body that is raised although it has something familiar there are things unfamiliar about it. It has new properties in that it can go through locked doors, yet it can also consume food. So the understanding is that Jesus was not back in town as he was before but his body was neither abandoned nor resuscitated but transformed.

So what are we to make of all of this? As we saw earlier the Jews understood resurrection to be about all the righteous dead and maybe all the unrighteous dead being raised at the end of time when God would make all things new. We appear to be faced with the challenge that only makes sense within the world view of Judaism that Jesus was raised from the dead but at the same time challenges the Jewish understanding of how God would get the people from that point in time and space to the end. Faced with all of this we either come up with a new understanding of our

own or we could be novel and consider that the disciples were telling the truth that Jesus was raised neither the body being abandoned or resuscitated but transformed.

So what does this all mean?

The resurrection is the beginning and the guarantee of the new creation that although it doesn't look like what the Jews thought it would look like the new day has indeed dawned even though it doesn't seem it. The world whether it knows it or not has already been changed and is under the Lordship of Jesus.

The Churches role is to proclaim that lordship of Jesus and to live under that lordship. The other meanings follow on.

1. New life. For the individual. The resurrection is about transformation, and we can be transformed as well. For divided communities. Our world is in dire need of the unifying spirit of God, and resurrection means that it is available for those who place themselves under the lordship of Christ.
2. New Hope. No longer is our world confined to a knowledge of existence between life and death. Resurrection removes the barrier of death. Back to the start of this address I noted that resurrection was a metaphor for return of those separated from God through sin. Resurrection gives new hope for those of us separated from God by sin. We have a means to return to God and to be made right by God, through the resurrection of Jesus we are transformed, just as Jesus is transformed and remade renewed and restored.
3. New Behavior. No longer can we live according to the old patterns of life if we are living a new transformed restored life through the resurrection. The old ways of living lead to separation, to our being lifeless and disconnected like the nation of Israel in the valley of the dry bones. New wine needs new wine skins, and so we need new ways of living that is commensurate with the new life we have in Christ.

There was also a new clarity on the issue of hope. In the resurrection of Jesus there came an understanding that we will also be raised to new embodied life.

This is why the resurrection account is so important and we remember that Jesus is raised in his new humanity. Yes he is still the eternal son of God uncreated, but he humbled himself to become a human being and Jesus in his humanity is transformed. This is the hope that we have. If Jesus is transformed in his divinity he has nothing to say to us, but he is transformed in his humanity which he holds for eternity and takes our transformed humanity into the very nature and being of the trinity.

One very important thing needs to be noted. Those who most vehemently announced that Jesus had been raised from the dead, the world had been renewed, and therefore they had new life and were transformed and changed by him and their relationship with him were also clear and vehement that this did not mean that all the problems of the world had been sorted out and every one could just simply bumble on in a holy blasé manner or even a triumphant Christian world. Paul writes

about the defeat of principalities while he is in prison by the very principality that he is writing about. He writes about unity in Christ to a deeply divided Christian community. Paul is able to affirm that the new has broken into the old and that at the same time the old is still active real and sometimes even powerful.

Does this mean that the resurrection means nothing? In the end has Jesus accomplished nothing? If Jesus won the victory over sin and death why is there war, and rumors of war, why is there violence, suffering, why are there holocausts.

The answer from the Christian point of view can not be that nothing has changed that Jesus simply gave us a new spirituality. Nor can we say that well there are some politically subversive social ways of living towards which he pointed, but every one has almost universally failed to do. Nor can we say that the world is very wicked but Jesus gives us the means to leave this world behind, and his followers can just gloss over all of that, and go to a remote joyous place called heaven after we die.

Somehow we have to live by a combination of beliefs that sometimes seem in tension with each other.

1. We have to live by faith in Jesus and what he has accomplished on the cross. We can not say that Jesus did not achieve anything. If he is raised from the dead, then we are faced with a new world order whether we like it or not.
2. We have to live by hope in the final implementation of the reign of God. Jesus resurrection is the promise that the end of time is about resurrection, and that all those who place their faith and trust in him will be raised with him at that time, and all those who are found to be acceptable people in the eyes of God will be raised with him to this new life that Jesus embodies and foreshadows for us.
3. Live by love in the present. Because of what Jesus has done and we are now equipped with Jesus own spirit we are not called to snatch people out of this world but to go into the world, to announce the lordship of Jesus, which means to transform individuals, communities, societies, and creation its self with the love of God.

When we start to do this it will awake us to be truly human. Jesus called Israel to be Israel indeed. The church is called to call people to be human indeed. To love one another, to care for creation and to worship the God in whose image we are made and to follow Jesus. As we go on this road we will follow the way of the cross. Go to where people are in pain to embody the healing love of God where those people are in pain.

There is no point embodying that love of God in a holy huddle away from where that healing love is needed. But the church in offering this Jesus shaped love lives by the belief and hope that with the cross there is resurrection. It isn't about putting up with this mess and hoping for better in the next. We are commissioned to create beauty out of ugliness, order out of chaos, hope out of despair, peace out of violence, light out of darkness, and love out of hatred.

We will only ever achieve a small amount of these tasks. But when we do there will be hidden light reflect glory shining both on us and through us, and in doing so we will be the people of God, we will be people of the resurrection, the people that God calls us to be.