

Easter Sunday sermon

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The fact of resurrection?

How much does it matter to you what actually happened in the past?

Have you ever researched an event which happened before you were born; why?

Last year I went to a little town in England called Turvey to see where my ancestors came from. We have ship's records of the journey from London to Lyttleton in 1858, which list my grandmother's grandfather, one Samuel Ayers, who came as a boy with his parents, sister, aunt and uncle. It was special for me to see the town, the church where Samuel sang as a choir boy, the stone with which he and his father learned the building trade.

But maybe it doesn't matter. Leave the past well alone, some say – what difference does it make to us what happened 200 years ago, let alone 2000?!

This morning we celebrate an event which happened on Easter Day, which we in the Christian church honour as the day that something extraordinary happened to the crucified body of Jesus of Nazareth. Does it matter to you what happened to Jesus' body?

If someone asked you what you think about that, how would you answer?

You've probably heard various arguments about it. Ever since the first Easter Day it has been a topic of hot controversy. The Gospels describe how confused people were, even on the actual day, about what had happened to Jesus' body, conflicting reports quickly began to circulate. The resurrection of Jesus has perhaps been the single biggest source in human history of accusations of 'fake news'.

This morning I would like to present to you what I think about what actually happened that Sunday morning, with some hard evidence. But I do this acknowledging that you may hold different convictions, or are swayed by different evidence. I hope to also be clear about why I think that it does matter what happened that day.

That Jesus of Nazareth was a real historical human person is not in doubt. There is plenty of historical evidence for the fact that he did live in Israel 2000 years ago and that he was killed by the common Roman execution method of crucifixion. We have no reason to doubt the historic validity of the accounts in the 4 gospels of the details of his death. Jesus was undoubtedly whipped and beaten and nailed through his wrists and ankles to a wooden cross, and he really did die.

There is also little doubt to the historical validity of the site of the crucifixion and his burial in a stone tomb. Before I got to pretty little Turvey I went to Israel, and visited the church built over Jesus' tomb. The Church of the Holy Sepulcher is surely, it must be, surely, the most crazy intense multilayered confusing magnificent bizarre place on planet earth. It is churches within churches, era layered on era, history and devotion, riddled with church conflicts, and scarred by war, fire and destruction, a focal point for people from every nation. Here's a guy from Africa who looked so magnificent I had to take his photo.

The layers and layers of history and symbolism and 'bling' cannot however overcome the powerful tangible sense of reality – that this was the very place, of the cross and the tomb. For me it was the rocks that spoke to me. The feel of the millenia in stone. We went into a tomb cut into the stone, just as Jesus' tomb would have been, seen where a round stone would have covered the entrance. It was utterly astonishing.

It is possible that Jesus' disciples stole his body in the night and carried it off naked and still bleeding, leaving the linen cloth behind to trick the women. But the crucifixion site was not far from the city gate and crawling with Roman soldiers whose sole job it was to prevent exactly that kind of carry-on.

Some have claimed that Jesus didn't actually die but was just in a coma for a couple of days, but to me this is not at all possible. Roman execution methods were too effective for that.

It is possible that the whole resurrection narrative was a grief-induced post-traumatic collective hallucination.

Personally I do think that we as people of Christian faith have to confront this question. If you decide that it is not historically accurate then be clear about why you come to that conclusion.

It matters to me because it mattered so much to the followers of Jesus back in the 1st century. They claimed, very early after the events took place, that the body of Jesus had vanished and that afterwards they had encountered Jesus in a very different form, in a way which was hard to describe but which was both spiritual and physical.

They summed this experience up in the phrase 'He is risen' by which, in my understanding, they meant that his dead body had dramatically and suddenly burst up and out of normal physical form into a heavenly form.

In our earliest Christian scriptures this claim is made, that God raised Jesus from the dead. This forced the early Christians into a total re-think of everything Jesus said and did, integrating this in a radical new way with everything they knew about God through the prophets and Hebrew scriptures.

And it meant for them also that God's action of raising Jesus from the dead directly impacted their own eternal destiny. They believed that from that moment on they were included in the raising – that all followers of Jesus would also be raised from the dead at the end of time.

I'd like to talk for a moment about one intriguing detail of the Easter story, the cloth that Jesus was wrapped in as he was lifted down from the cross and laid in the tomb. I've been reading about the Shroud of Turin – have any of you gone into this curious puzzle? You may know that the Shroud of Turin is an ancient piece of linen, which has miraculously survived through many many years, even surviving a fire, and is now stored with the greatest of care in a church in Turin, Italy. It is about one metre wide and over 4 metres long. It is a very rare surviving burial cloth from the 1st century. The burial custom in Jesus' day was for the body to be laid (if you could afford it) on a long linen cloth, feet to the end, head in the middle, then the cloth draped carefully over the face and down to the feet. The Shroud of Turin is marked with the residue of quite a lot of blood, but most mysteriously it is also marked with the image of a man. It has been extensively researched and the scientists have not been able to explain how the marks got embedded in the cloth. They certainly were not painted on. And we know that the marks have been there for many many hundreds of years.

It seems to me from my reading that each time it is researched the scientists seem to reach more agreement that it is in fact the image of Jesus of Nazareth. Certainly the cloth is old enough, and certainly the cloth was at some time in Jerusalem, as seeds from there were found on it. Certainly the man whose body it was wrapped in was crucified, and most realistic are the markings, showing over 300 wounds including punctures at the wrist and ankles, scratches around the forehead, and a puncture wound to the chest.

As for the markings showing clearly the face, hands, and body? These it would seem must have been made by some kind of radiation. They are kind of burn marks, embedded in the linen itself. They are kind of like the after-images left on walls after a nuclear blast.

When I read this it just made sense. This really is what I believe happened to Jesus' body, that in a single burst of power his crucified and battered body atomised, de-materialised. I really do believe that God is all-powerful, and that this force of heaven burst through and consumed the physical body of Jesus with a great flash of divine light. It's not so impossible is it?

I believe that when the women came with their embalming spices they found that very shroud lying there, full length, but empty, like a deflated lilo. Luke's gospel describes it as "lying there by itself".

Before I finish with the Shroud I think it is worth having another look at the face. If this really is an after-image of Jesus' body then this really is a photo of Jesus.

The shroud tells us that Jesus was tall for his time, and he genuinely is handsome.

If this is his face in death then he really did die in peace because this is not the face of someone who died screaming with pain and despair. This is a deeply serene face.

So, anyway, you'll see this image from time to time as it bounces around the internet and in my opinion you can have some real degree of confidence that it really could be the real thing.

Which gets us back to the 'so what' question. In this day and age we are taught scepticism with our mother's milk. To believe anything is counter-cultural these days, where facts are subjective and the notion of truth is a quaint old-fashioned tea-cosy of an idea. In a century of Harry Potter, bluetooth and microcomputers the problem is not whether or not Jesus's dead body vanished into thin air. The problem we face is that anything is possible and nothing matters. "You do you" is the refrain of our age.

Does it matter to you that Jesus rose from the dead? Does it matter to me?

Three things matter to me about the Gospel of the Christian faith. First that it is founded firm. Second that it is unique. And third that it forges hope.

The writers of the Gospels and letters of the New Testament staked their claim on the death and resurrection of Jesus, and it matters to me that I can take all of it seriously. I think that we get to choose; either we agree with the reality of their testimony or dismiss it as a hoax and a lie. I value historical evidence such as the shroud not because my faith hinges on it but because it is a sign to me that I can trust Peter and Paul and Mary and John and Mark and the words that they have left for us. The Gospel is founded firm.

Various other religions have stories of people who die and are reborn – it's the stuff of legend in many cultures. What makes the Christian claim unique is that it does claim historical origins. Christians claim that our leader died and was transformed in a way which is distinctly different from any other faith. This has particular implications for ethics and spirituality and eternal destiny and I am fascinated by those. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is unique.

And finally, the authenticity of the resurrection of Jesus is for me a gate which opens into hope. Hope is in short supply these days. Maybe it always has been. The Gospel is Good News because Jesus overcame death, conquered evil, not through violence but through

surrender. Hope is available to every person, no matter how terrible their circumstances. Light breaks through, Love wins. And we are going to talk more about this next week.

Well, I wonder what you think about all of this. Do tell me over morning tea.

For now, as we move into sharing Communion together, my prayer is that God's holy Spirit to grow a sense of confidence in you, confidence not in what we can or cannot understand, confidence not in the work of scientists and historians, but confidence that Jesus has gone ahead of us, through death into life. This is the foundation of our faith.