



Why is the Resurrection so important to Christians today? By The Reverend Mark Birch, Minor Canon and Precentor

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As a priest, I sometimes get interesting reactions from strangers in the street. One Sunday, when I was dressed in a cassock, a young man approached and said simply, with some force; 'When you're dead you're dead. You don't get up again.' There was no opportunity to respond, and it's one of those occasions where I'm still not sure what would have been the most helpful thing to say.

He's right, of course. As a priest, I have been with people as they have died, and I have accompanied relatives to view the bodies of their departed loved-ones. No-one has ever got up.

But this is no surprise, and doesn't in any way affect my belief in the Resurrection. Of course, resurrection is a belief held not just by Christians – it is shared, in a general sense, with Muslims and Jews - but Christians understand it in a very particular way. Believing in the Resurrection, for Christians, is not about expecting dead people to get up out of their coffins on a regular basis (that is the stuff of horror movies). Believing in the Resurrection is about one particular man rising from the dead, at a particular point in history, and how that particular man, at that particular time, connects with people now, and in every age.

Jesus of Nazareth is a figure of respect among people of all religions and none. His teaching, as recorded in the New Testament, focused on the primacy of love (for example St John 13:34), which most people find uncontroversial and, indeed, aspirational. While that could be a rather bland aspiration which nobody could argue with, love is given a very particular meaning in the wider context of Jesus' earthly life. Love leads Jesus to the Cross (St John 15:13). Far from just being a 'warm, fuzzy feeling', this kind of love is sacrificial. It is about offering yourself for the sake of others. That doesn't necessarily mean we have to physically die to show love, although some have, whom the Church remembers with particular reverence. For most of us 'sacrificial love' might mean offering our time, our attention, and our resources for the sake of others, especially those who are most at risk of being ignored or forgotten ('the poor', for example in St Luke 14:13).

However, for Christians, Jesus' teaching about love has an even greater scope and relevance because of the Resurrection; *his* resurrection. The bizarre, confusing, and frightening events of the first Easter suggested to his followers that Jesus should be understood not just within the context of his physical life, but within a far wider context, and indeed beyond the widest context that anyone could ever imagine. His resurrection implied that his presence was not limited to those thirty-odd years that ended with his crucifixion. His presence was for all time (St Matthew 28:20), and indeed beyond or outside of time (St John 1:2-5).

In the wake of the Resurrection, Christians began to understand that Jesus was not just an inspiring teacher with a great message about love. They began to understand that he and his message had universal, eternal meaning. It was not just about how we should love one another now, but that self-offering love somehow underpins the whole cosmos, and suggests things about the Creator himself. Gradually Christians came to understand God as an eternal exchange of love between Father, Son and Holy Spirit (The Trinity), which overflows into creation, and draws creation into a loving relationship with God. The presence of the resurrected Jesus with his followers was more than just a fond memory of an inspiring teacher. It was the presence of the Creator who loved all things and all time into existence from the beginning.

To go back to the young man who addressed me so forcefully on the subject of resurrection, Christians are often challenged, in our scientific age, to present the evidence. Where is the proof that Jesus rose from the dead? Clearly there was no videography, and archaeology can only get us so far. All we have are witnesses; the witnesses on that first Easter day, and the 40 days following until, it is said, he finally ascended into heaven. More than that, the witnesses who kept the story and the teaching alive, and committed it to writing in what eventually became the New Testament. Even more than that, those who continued to reflect on the story, developing the Church's understanding of the nature of God, revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Yet more than that, the generations of Christians, up to and including today, who received the message, prayed it and witnessed to it by their lives and their deaths. The only evidence that can be offered for the resurrection is the Church itself; the body of people who continue to witness to the earth-shaking, world-transforming, continuing presence and power of the God revealed in Jesus of Nazareth.

'If Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain' wrote St Paul (1 Corinthians 15:14). Christians are not stupid. They don't believe in the Resurrection because they like believing in impossible things. The Resurrection is important because it confirms the hope that is offered to us in the one we now call Christ. This is the hope that lovelessness (sin) and death itself (the complete absence of the possibility of love) have ultimately been overcome, and that we are offered a share in that ultimate triumph of love declared in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.