

He is risen

John 20

Dead people don't rise back to life. Everybody knows that. In our day and age, rational people don't believe that people can rise from the dead. Maybe religious nuts think that they do, because that's a fairy story they've been told since they were children. Maybe deluded people do, because they're emotional enough or weak enough or foolish enough to be able to believe it. But most people who are thinking straight know that dead people don't rise to life, don't they? It's simply not possible, so it doesn't happen.

That's how a lot of people in the 21st century think. Quite often, we suppose ourselves to be a sophisticated culture that knows a lot more than the superstitious people of ancient civilisations 2000 years ago. But when we think like that, we're arrogant, and wrong. Ancient Greeks and Romans knew just as well as we do that dead people don't come back to life.

Like today, some believed that there might be life after death, and some thought we've got no way of knowing whether there is until we get there. But nobody thought that dead people came back to life here in this world, actually *overcoming* death. It's simply not possible, so it doesn't happen.

Well, that might all be true... assuming that there is no God. But suppose there was an all powerful God, an awesome Creator of the universe. If He were real, how *could* it be impossible for *Him* to bring dead people to life?

Supposing that God *told the world* that He would send His own Son to live here, and be killed here to pay the price for this world's rebellion against Him, and that His Son would rise back to life? Supposing that this all powerful God staked His whole trustworthiness with a promise like that?

Well if there was a God like that, everything would hinge on one dead person *actually rising back to life*. Did Jesus rise from the dead or not? Your answer to that changes everything.

If it's not true that Jesus rose from the dead; then the God of the Bible is a liar; you have no hope of anything other than this life, carrying around all the pain and regret of your life's mistakes; death is the end; and we might as well pack up this service, throw out our Bibles and give up on faith in Jesus.

God Himself has said as much in 1 Corinthians 15. Here's some verses from that chapter: 'But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead,

how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith... And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins... If the dead are not raised, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die."

But what if it *is* true that Jesus rose from the dead? Well, John tells us in 20:1-18 that it's true; that there's evidence that Jesus *did* rise to life. He tells us some of the incredible things that means for us. And He lets us know what we need to do about it.

John told us in 19:25 how one Friday, Mary Magdalene watched Jesus very definitely die. And now, on Sunday morning, before the dawn had broken, she had come to the tomb, and found it... empty!

Now how do you explain that? John doesn't - at least, not yet. We're invited into the mystery, to wonder with Mary where the body has gone. 'There must be a perfectly rational explanation for all this...' That's what people say when something mysterious happens, right? Peter and another disciple (probably John); they must have thought that too, when Mary ran to tell them in v.2, 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put Him!'

There's more running in vv.3-4. There's more running in this passage than in all of the rest of the gospels put together. Peter and John are urgent in their desire to get to the tomb and see for themselves. Imagine what was racing through their minds as they raced through the streets of Jerusalem, out of the city and towards the garden tomb. '*Who* could have?...' '*Why* would they?...' '*How* did they?...'

Who took the body? The Jewish authorities? The Roman authorities? It didn't make any sense; both of them wanted to make sure everyone knew beyond doubt that Jesus was dead and buried. One of the other disciples, maybe? But what for? Why hadn't they heard about it? And how could any of Jesus' followers get past the guard of soldiers posted at the tomb?

Then the two men arrive at the tomb, heart pumping and breathless from the running and from the crisis of the moment. John, a teenager, wins the running race. He peers into the tomb in v.5 and examines the evidence. The strips of linen that had wrapped Jesus' body are lying there. Wherever the body is, it's not wrapped up anymore.

Then Peter, catching up with his younger friend, gets to the tomb in vv.6-7. And, true to form, Peter goes rushing in to the tomb, with no hesitation. And he looks at the evidence more closely. Not only are the grave clothes lying there - they've been folded up neatly.

The separate cloth that had covered Jesus' head was folded up by itself, sitting separately from the cloth that had wrapped the body. It *looked* like the body had just... disappeared. Like the grave clothes were still in the same place, but the body they covered had just... gone... like the air disappearing from a balloon.

John steps in at v.8 to join Peter in seeing that image. And now, he's seen enough. The empty tomb. The folded grave clothes. He knows what has happened. He believes. Jesus is alive!

And v.9 tells us that, although they didn't get it yet, the disciples would later understand that God had told the world in Scripture that this would happen. It's the first moment in the passage where John tells us what has actually happened - and he does it in a sentence that tells us that really, we should have expected it.

Most importantly, after everyone else has left, the living Jesus appears to Mary. He arrives at the scene in v.14, but it takes a short exchange between the two before in v.16, Mary lifts her head, opens her eyes, and recognises the amazing truth of who is reunited with her now.

What Jesus tells her is that, now He is alive again, He is returning to His Father. He is never to die again. He is rising to a forever life that will not end, and that will always be with God. He is risen, and has defeated death so that it will never touch Him again.

So what's the evidence we're looking at? An empty tomb that should not be empty, because the people in power want to show that Jesus' body is there. Folded grave clothes, that look like the body has just disappeared. A Bible that says there *is* a God, who created life, who announced that He would bring His Son back to life, and then did it.

Disciples who walked with Jesus in this world, who couldn't get into the guarded tomb before it was empty, walking into it believing that Jesus had been telling the truth all along. A woman who claims to have seen the risen Jesus, talked with the risen Jesus, hugged the risen Jesus. Jesus declaring that He is returning now to His Father, never to die again.

‘Wait a minute, there must be a perfectly rational explanation...’ How many times do you think people have said that about the resurrection that John believed in and that Christians all over the world stake their lives on? How often have you said that or thought that?

Well, there is a perfectly rational explanation. It’s the one that John came to realise, and believed in. There is a God. He declared and published to the world in His Word that His own Son would rise from death to life. Jesus lived. Jesus died. And Jesus rose back to life, just like God said He would. There is nothing irrational about that. If you think there is, let me ask you, what is irrational about it?

It’s all awesome, wonderful, unexpected and unparalleled, but none of that makes it irrational. A man who turned water into wine, fed a crowd of 5,000 with a few loaves and fish, opened the eyes of a man born blind, and demonstrated His power over death by raising the dead Lazarus back to life - *that* man, that Son of God, rises from death to life. What’s irrational about that?

Question - What’s the most rational explanation for the empty tomb?

If none of this is true, we might as well pack up and go home. I need to quit as a minister, we all need to give up following Jesus and find something else to do with our lives.

But what if John’s right? What if it is true that Jesus rose from the dead? How does that affect you and me? It changes everything.

It’s not that after Jesus died on the cross, Christians assume that He went straight to Heaven, and so shall we. It’s not that Jesus died once, came back to life, and then unfortunately died again.

Jesus died on the cross *here on earth*. He rose back to life *here on earth*, beginning the breaking in of the new creation. He rose, alive forever, to Heaven to be with God the Father.

Here’s what 1 Corinthians 15:20-23 say about what that means for us: ‘But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, *the firstfruits* of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will

be made alive. But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when He comes, those who belong to Him.'

All who are 'in Adam' die - that means all humanity. But those of us who are 'in Christ' will be made alive. He said He'd rise from death into forever life, and everyone who believes in Him will too. Because He *has* risen from death, we know that He has the power to make good on everything else He said as well. So we know that if we're holding on to Him, His forever life is for us, too.

That power is breaking in here and now. Humanity knows and feels all of the brokenness, mess, disappointment and distress of a world and a life that has tried to go it without God.

But the people, the communities and the nations who bow to Jesus are *beginning* to experience freedom and forgiveness; healing, repair, a tidying up and reordering and a putting-right; a lifetime of growing more and more into the full life that God intended for this world.

But it will only be fully realised when we go through *our* deaths. Jesus has been through His, and revealed to the world what's beyond that for Him - a forever life with God in a new creation. He says that all of that is also for all who go through life - and death - believing in Him. That's the reality John tells us about here in his book, too.

This is the climax of the whole of John's gospel; this is where it all comes together. It's been a book full of signs pointing people to who Jesus is and why that matters for us. Now, we're watching the greatest sign of all - Jesus rises from the dead. That sign points to Jesus being truly God Himself; to real, recreated, full life breaking in to our world; and to death no longer being the end for those belonging to Jesus.

We saw Jesus react with powerful emotion; deep anger when He faced a hated enemy called Death, and struck a blow against that most feared opponent when He raised Lazarus from his tomb. Death lashed back, and tried to claim Jesus, to end Him forever.

Now, in His resurrection, Jesus ends Death forever. This is not just Jesus striking a blow against the enemy that claims us all, it's Him winning the war. The conflict with Death is one none of us can avoid. Do you want to face it yourself? Don't you want to be following the King that's already won the war?

Question - How does the promise of eternal life beyond death affect your life here and now?

Twice, Mary is asked, 'Why are you crying?' The angels in v.13 ask her. Then Jesus Himself asks her in v.15. We know why she's crying - she saw Jesus die, and she loved Him. Now she's distressed, because the body is missing. The angels and Jesus all know perfectly well why she's crying. But they layer the question upon her so it turns over like a tune that's stuck in her head. It's like a song that's stuck in our heads as we read it ourselves - 'Why are you crying? Why are you crying?'

Something about this day, and this event, cries out to us, 'Why are you crying?' It declares hope to us. To discover that Jesus is alive is to invite us to joy, to being thrilled that the end of death, grief, tears and hopelessness is discovered. Jesus is alive! And that makes a difference for those adopted into His family.

v.17 - 'Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.' The risen Jesus says that He is returning to His Father God now. But He also says His Father's family is getting bigger now.

All throughout John's gospel, Jesus has been referring to 'His Father.' He has shared with people how knowing Jesus means knowing God, and how God the Father will welcome those who know Jesus. Jesus prayed in John 17 for those who know Him to become one with each other, and truly united to God Himself.

Now, the risen Jesus tells His followers that His Father is *our Father*. His God is *our God*. Jesus' death and resurrection has completed something to bring about the unity Jesus longed for. Now, truly, those who live and die and rise to life forever with Jesus, are those who can call the eternal God their Daddy, just as Jesus does. Don't you want to be part of *that* family?

Finally, John 20 calls us to respond to all of these life-defining claims. You could disbelieve that Jesus rose from the grave, and that He is alive. And you could give up on all of this following Jesus that we and 2.5 billion Christians around the world set about.

Or, like John, you could believe that He is risen, and accept everything that means for you. John never uses the noun, 'faith.' Not once in his whole book. But he uses the verb, 'to believe,' nearly a hundred times.

So John doesn't want to talk about faith as a noun, like it's a thing to possess. 'I've got my faith.' 'My faith keeps me strong.' 'I might not have much, but I've still got my faith.' Faith in the risen Jesus is not a pet, not a thing to cling to and possess, or lock up and hide away and put on the shelf for whenever you need to pick it up again.

John talks about faith as a verb. It's an action. It's a thing to do, and to keep doing, for life itself. It's like breathing. *Believe in Jesus.* Day by day, *believe* that Jesus broke Death, and that that changes everything for you. *Believe* that He is alive forever, and so shall you be, because He's your King and you are depending on Him. *Believe* that this resurrection life is breaking into this world now, and that through that, God is beginning to put things right in this warped and washed up world.

Next week, you'll read John tell you in v.31 that that's been the whole point of his book: 'But these are written that you may believe (or 'keep believing') that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name.' To *exist*, you need to breath, you need to *keep* breathing. To *live*, now and forever, you need to believe in His name, you need to *keep* believing in His name.

More than that, John says, go and tell the world that this has happened. In v. 17, Jesus tells Mary to go and tell the disciples that Jesus is alive, and is going now to reign in Heaven. And in v.18, we read Mary going to tell them, 'I have seen the Lord!'

Maybe you think you can't do that. You could believe all this, but how could you tell the world? You're the last person anyone would listen to. Well, so was Mary. In that time and place, the last person you would trust with important news that you needed everyone to hear and believe was a woman, especially one with a reputation for having a dark past.

Then and there, women were not listened to. They could not testify in court. Those with dark pasts and dodgy reputations were especially unlikely to be listened to, never mind believed. But *this* is the first person Jesus entrusts the most important news in the world to.

And He entrusts it to you. Don't you doubt it. *You* can know new life, here and now. *You* can live forever with God where tears are forgotten. *You* can call God Father, with the same intimacy and closeness as His own Son

Jesus. And *you* - yes, *you* - can tell the people you share life with, that everything about life has changed, now and forever, because Jesus is risen.

Silent Reflection

Because He died, your sin is dealt with. Because He rose, you know that He defeated it. You know that death cannot be the end for you, because He promised you that forgiven, forever life is for you too, because you believe in Him.