

Without belief in the Resurrection of Christ, life is hope-less

April 2000

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published in Conservatism magazine

- Sir Brian Mawhinney, the former Chairman of the Conservative Party, reflects on the continuing life-transforming power of the Easter story

- At Easter Christ rose from the grave - this resurrection is central to Christian belief.

The events of Easter

Paul understood - after all he knew the background. As he sat contemplating what to write, he remembered that during His life, Jesus of Nazareth had told the crowds who followed Him, listening to His teaching and marvelling at His miracles, that on the third day after His death He would rise again from the dead.

Looking back on those days it was clear that neither Jesus' enemies, the church leaders and lawyers of their day, nor His close friends, His disciples, really understood what He meant or, indeed, believed Him. But neither could they rid themselves of the feeling that His prophecy carried weight; that it was truly significant even if they did not know why. Paul reflected on the amazing events which had taken place.

After Jesus died on the Cross, a rich man from Aramathea, who was a follower of Jesus, plucked up considerable courage and asked Pilate if he, Joseph, could be given Jesus' body for burial. Pilate, after checking with the centurion in charge of the crucifixion party that Jesus was dead, agreed to let Joseph take the body. He wrapped it in a clean linen shroud; helped by Nicodemus who brought spices so that the burial customs of the day could be observed. The tomb, set in a garden, had been hewn from a large rock. It resembled a small cave into which people could walk, perhaps having to take care not to bump their heads.

After he had laid out the body, Joseph rolled a massive rock across the entrance of the tomb, to block it. He left Mary the mother of Jesus and Mary Magdalene, a close disciple, there to grieve until the start of the Sabbath.

But the church leaders were worried. They had manipulated the crowds to demand that Jesus be crucified. They had persuaded Pilate, under threat of organising a riot, that he should sentence Jesus to death, despite Pilate's reluctance and his wife warning him not to do it. And they had overseen the death process - the nails in Jesus' hands and feet and the spear into His side.

Jesus was dead, and they were still worried. So they went to Pilate demanding another decision which would make absolutely sure that this Jesus could not make any more trouble for them.

'Sir,' they said, 'we remember how that imposter said that after three days He would rise from the dead. Given that you have let His disciples take His body and put it in one of their tombs, we want you to order that the tomb be made secure. Frankly we are worried that some of His disciples will sneak in on the third day and steal the body. They will then claim that He rose from the dead as He said He would. People will be impressed and may even start to believe His disciples' claims. If that should happen we would lose control over them and you would have more trouble on your hands. Please help us make sure this does not happen.'

Pilate agreed and they left, both to secure the rock at the mouth of the tomb and to mount a guard. Some of the centurion's soldiers should be more than a match for a few, sneaky, unarmed disciples, they thought. It was on the following day that all the trouble started. Some

of the women who had followed Jesus went to His tomb to anoint His body with spices. They found the great stone rolled away from the mouth of the cave and an angel sitting on the stone - but no body.

The empty tomb

They saw the soldiers who had fainted in fright at the sight of the angel - but the tomb was empty. They immediately summoned Peter and John who entered the tomb and found the linen grave clothes - but no body.

No body!

Certainly not, indicated the angel who had rolled back the rock from the mouth of the tomb. He then uttered these timeless words to the women: "Do not be afraid; for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; He has risen, just as He said. Come and see the place where He lay. Then go quickly and tell His disciples He has risen from the dead." (Matt 28: 5-7) (NIV)

When the guards "awoke" they were petrified with fear. They had been ordered to stop a few simple men and women from stealing a dead body. Instead an angel had descended from heaven, there had been an earthquake, the big stone had been rolled back - and their worst fears were realised.

No body.

Deeply anxious about their futures, the guards reported what had happened to the churchleaders. No doubt to their amazement they were not summarily executed. Instead they were bribed. They were given money to tell people that the disciples had come at night, while the guards were asleep (!!), and had stolen the body.

And the churchleaders promised to "protect" the guards if Pilate should get to hear what had really happened. Many Jews believed the guards' story. Paul remembered all this as he sat in Ephesus, probably a little before Pentecost in AD 57, to write to the church in Corinth. They were struggling to put their faith into practice. They had questions about marriage - including second and mixed marriages - and celibacy.

They had raised difficulties about "the strong" and "the weak" and offerings to idols; about church behaviour especially speaking in tongues and spiritual gifts. And they were perplexed about the resurrection. Paul took the latter head on for he understood that it was the fulcrum of their shared belief. First he reminded them of the evidence of Jesus' resurrection.

Jesus' appearances after resurrection

Mary saw Him - and spoke to Him - in the garden where His tomb was located. Jesus joined a couple as they walked the seven miles from Jerusalem to Emmaus. He talked to them about the "good" man who had just been crucified and who had said He would rise from the dead on that very day. Later He revealed who He was as they all had an evening meal together.

He appeared to the disciples as they huddled in a locked room afraid of the Jews, indeed afraid for their very lives. He appeared to them again a week later when Thomas, who had missed the first meeting, was present. And He appeared to them a third time, as they fished in the Sea of Tiberius, eating bread and fish with them on the beach.

Then, Paul told the Corinthian Christians, Jesus appeared to more than five hundred people at one time, most of whom were still alive. In effect he told them that they could go and question them if they had any doubts. And finally, Paul said, He appeared to me personally on the road to Damascus - so I know what I am talking about.

In Paul's mind all this was the essential preliminary to the main truth which he had to put to

the Corinthians. He had to help them understand the fundamental importance of Jesus' resurrection and, indeed, the reality that unless they subscribed to this fundamental belief they could not claim to be Christians. The stark truth was: no resurrection - no saving faith.

So Paul set out the evidence that Jesus did indeed rise from the dead: *"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. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that He raised Christ from the dead. But He did not raise Him if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men. But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the first fruits 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."* (1 Corinthians 15:12-22) (NIV)

The one issue which we all face

As we start this new millennium, the issue which faces all of us is the same one Paul outlined two millennia ago.

Men and women have failed to live up to God's standard for their lives; some by more, others by less - but all have fallen short. As Isaiah put it, "sin" has separated us and God.

God chose to provide a way that would enable all of us to get back into a true relationship with Him. Because He is a holy and just God, this required that our sins be punished so that they could be eradicated.

God sent His Son, Jesus, to live here and teach people that God loved them whatever the state of their lives - and that He, Jesus, would become the way - the only way - for men and women to get back into communion with God.

God also sent His Son to die, so that the penalty associated with our sins might be met for those who were prepared to exercise saving faith. This possibility is open to all who put their trust in the redeeming death of Jesus and in His resurrection.

The death of Christ...

As human beings we have a need to be challenged by events - by evidence of God's intervention in our world - to make us face up to spiritual reality. There was little in the death of Christ itself which would have persuaded those watching the event that it was of eternal significance. Certainly Jesus' behaviour and demeanour were impressive. He did not curse or rail at His accusers. He so impressed a convict being crucified alongside Him that the convict's whole attitude and outlook changed - a "deathbed" conversion if ever there was one.

And Jesus was so considerate, even when hanging on the cross, that He made arrangements for the care of His mother who was standing nearby watching. Certainly He would have struck those around the Cross as being forgiving, calmly trusting in His God and even in this extremity, mindful of the needs of others. Indeed the centurion was so impressed that he decided that Jesus was innocent.

But would those around the Cross necessarily have realised that they were watching God's redemptive plan in action? I doubt it, even allowing for the fact that at the time of the crucifixion there were some pretty unusual things happening in the area.

As Jesus was dying suddenly and inexplicably the sun's light was extinguished for three hours. There was an earthquake strong enough to split rocks. The veil in the temple, which shielded

the holiest area from general view, was torn from top to bottom. And many saints, who had died, were raised from the dead and went to Jerusalem to meet with their friends and families.

So, yes, it was a pretty remarkable day with unforgettable events that would be etched in peoples' memories for a long time. But was all this a clear revelation that Jesus' death was God's saving intervention in human experience? Was it sufficiently challenging evidence that men and women needed to repent in front of a loving but righteous God?

No.

...and His resurrection

I say "no" because Paul said "no". He made it clear that it was Jesus' rising from the dead - this supernatural historic event - which was of the essence in God's plan of salvation and the revelation of the significance of Jesus' death. It was also the foundation stone of the Christian faith. Paul was unambiguous. You cannot be a Christian, be restored to communion with God, without believing in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. It is His new life which gives us new life. That is why the evidence is important. God does not expect us to exercise faith in a vacuum. The resurrection of Jesus was real. People met Him, talked to Him, and ate with Him after His resurrection.

What is impossible in human terms did happen and believing this opens the door to understanding and appropriating, personally, the significance of Jesus' death on the Cross.

Jesus' resurrection also separates Christianity from the other great world religions. They see Jesus as a good man and a prophet. In the resurrection we recognise Jesus as God's Son.

This is why Easter is such a joyous occasion for Christians. It proclaims God's love, embodies Jesus' challenge to the whole world and gives meaning and hope to those who are prepared to believe what really happened. But the other side of the coin is also true. Unless we believe in the resurrection life remains, literally, hope-less.