

Chapter 15

He's alive!

A good friend of mine, a surgeon, was well-known internationally and served on many committees, at home and overseas. He made valuable contributions to the education of students and graduates, being especially concerned that Christian doctors should have a good understanding of medical ethics. Then he died, quite suddenly, and we were all very shocked. A few months later I had a dream in which a company of Christian professionals were sitting round a committee table when the rest of us noticed that this respected colleague had joined us.

'But he's supposed to be dead', we said to each other, surprised and bewildered. He looked much the same as when we had last seen him, attentive and thoughtful. We were also curious about how he had found things in heaven. So my neighbour nudged me to ask him. After telling us about the lovely music he had heard there, we next dared to ask what the Lord was like, at which point our friend disappeared and I realised that it had just been a dream. Yet I knew that there could be no words to describe the glory of the risen Christ, now seated at the right hand of God.¹

He lives forever!

One of the first hymns I learned by heart and loved to sing as a child started solemnly and quietly with, 'Low in the grave he lay, Jesus my Saviour'. It then cheered up, getting faster and louder with the joyful chorus, 'Up from the grave he arose, with a mighty triumph o'er his foes ... and he lives forever...' It ends with a triumphant cry of, 'Hallelujah! Christ arose.' That hymn was written in the 19th century, inspired by the way the first century disciples had discovered its truth. The gloom following Good Friday was dispelled early on Sunday morning as the women who went to the tomb found its entrance no longer sealed. Inside were grave clothes, but no sign of a body. Mary Magdalene was the first to meet the risen Lord Jesus in the garden.

Then the women hurried to tell the good news to the disciples – and were not believed! Instead, Peter and John ran to see for themselves. As the women had said, they found that Jesus' body had gone. Only the empty grave clothes were left behind, neatly wrapped and laid aside.

Ten of the disciples were finally convinced of the amazing truth that he was alive again, when the risen Lord paid them a personal visit and they were overcome with joy. The eleventh man, Thomas, missed this event and questioned the story – until Jesus came to him in person, when he at once worshipped him as Lord and God.² Many other doubters since have followed his lead.

In Jerusalem there is still a garden tomb, open to visitors and set in a lovely garden, as was Jesus' original burial site. It does not matter whether or not it is the exact place of his grave. It does however convey what it must have been like. The burial chamber is rather like a cave. Outside is a heavy round stone, like a millstone, that would roll across the entrance and completely seal it. Part of an inside wall forms a shelf, long and wide enough to hold a body. One Easter morning a party of us visited the garden and found a closed door across the entrance to the tomb. On it was a simple notice saying, 'He is not here: He is risen'. Every time believers celebrate the joy of Easter day, they are reminded how impossible it was for death to keep its hold on Jesus. His Father had seen to that.³

Doubts dispelled

For many, the story of the first Easter weekend will already be very familiar. Others are perhaps a bit foggy about the details and a few more may find it completely new. For all of us, it can be hard to imagine even a fraction of the amazed wonder of the disciples as their Lord appeared among them again. Perhaps they, too, at first thought that they were dreaming, but this was no dream. Dead men don't walk. But Jesus walked, talked, made a lakeside barbecue and ate with his disciples, very much alive. He stayed around for weeks. Over 500 people saw him besides the Eleven.⁴ During those weeks he came and went in a bodily form that was the same and yet not the same. The scars of crucifixion were still visible, but the risen Lord could now

overcome solid and spatial barriers as he visited his old friends. John's Gospel tells us how he spent time with Peter and healed the painful embarrassment he must have felt after those three denials.⁵

There are slight variations in the details given in the four Gospel accounts, but the events were so amazing and the witnesses so different, that this should not hinder belief. Indeed, it would give more cause for suspicion if all the accounts were exactly the same.

Resurrection or resuscitation?

Even though there are still people who say that Jesus was resuscitated, not resurrected, the final thrust of a soldier's spear to his heart had been to make quite sure he was dead. Even without this, a flogged and crucified man would not have survived for three days, loaded with spices and without water. Resurrection differs from resuscitation.

One day during a busy outpatient clinic in Uganda, a junior doctor came to me with distressing news. He said, 'You remember that boy with croup? We put up a drip, but he has died. We have not yet told his father.'

'Croup', or laryngotracheitis, usually affects little children with small airways, easily obstructed by swollen mucus when infected, so it is potentially lethal. Yet the patient was too big for that to have been likely, so I immediately went to look at him. Sure enough, there he lay, quite still on the couch with a sheet over his face and no signs of life. Partly to show the juniors the practice of resuscitation, we cleared his airway, performed cardiac massage and gave artificial respiration. Fairly soon, to our delight he gasped, coughed up a plug of mucus and later sat up and asked for a drink. He had been successfully *resuscitated* but not truly *resurrected*.

Luke reports what must have been one of the Lord's very early appearances after his resurrection.⁶ Mary 'the wife of Clopas', had been among the women standing near the foot of the cross and seen Jesus die.⁷ Cleopas is probably the same name and it was as a couple that the two were walking home from Jerusalem, very much cast down

by disappointed hope and grief. Mrs Cleopas, for one, had seen the terrible trauma of crucifixion and had no doubt that Jesus was dead. When joined by another traveller they did not know who he was. I recently failed to recognise a young man known to me since he was a toddler, but I, too, saw him in unexpected circumstances. I can understand how the couple might naturally have thought that their walking companion was a stranger, not someone known to have died. It was seven miles to Emmaus. Luke tells us that on the journey Jesus had been spelling out to them the Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah.

His life and death had been foretold in so many prophecies. For example, he fulfilled the role of the suffering servant foretold by Isaiah.⁸ What a wonderful Bible study that must have been! It had warmed their hearts. As it was getting dark when they reached home, they invited him in. The true identity of the stranger only dawned on the couple when he broke bread at their table. Then he left them. Amazed and delighted they went all the way back to Jerusalem to rejoice with the other disciples at such great news.

Over the next few weeks the risen Lord Jesus would doubtless teach the disciples more about why he had died and the meaning of his resurrection. His cousin John the Baptist had first introduced Jesus to others as 'the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world'.⁹ Jesus was the perfect and final Passover lamb, who, unlike the sacrificed lambs, willingly chose to shed his blood in order to save others. In saying to the Father, 'Here I am, I have come to do your will,'¹⁰ he committed himself to the greatest self-offering of love ever known. In the previous chapter we saw how, through his death and resurrection, Jesus brought in a new covenant, or agreement, between God and mankind. The old sacrifices are no longer needed, because by accepting his loving payment of the ransom, repentant sinners can be freed, full of grateful love for him.

Justified

Writing to the Romans, Paul said that when God raised Christ from the dead, this completed the possibility of justification. One common

way of understanding this word is that it makes me ‘just as if I’d never sinned.’ This is true, but wonderfully, there is more. Our sin is not just dealt with and the slate wiped clean, leaving us in a ‘neutral’ state before God; we are also declared to be *positively* righteous in God’s sight. In legal terms, the judge of a court justifies people when he dismisses the charges against them, and declares them to be in right standing in the eyes of the law. So we are not only ‘just as if I’d never sinned’, but also ‘just as if I’d kept the law perfectly’.

Our justification is possible because Jesus, the perfectly righteous one, paid the death penalty for sin in our place. On the cross, he took all our sin and the punishment we deserved. In return we are given the gift of all his righteousness and life. The apostle Paul describes it as ‘not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ – the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith’.¹¹ When we repent and confess our sins, trusting his promise to wipe them out completely, the penalty we deserved is lifted and no record is kept. We are free to make a fresh start. The broken relationship with God is restored and peace with him renewed, through our Lord Jesus Christ.¹² God says, ‘I will remember their sins no more.’¹³ On the cross our sin was condemned, so that ‘the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us’.¹⁴ This means that Jesus’ righteousness is counted as our own and our sin is counted as his, so that in Christ ‘there is now no condemnation’.¹⁵

Let’s illustrate this with a modern parable. Those who use computers will know that to speak of ‘justification’ means to arrange a section of text so the edges are straight. We can send old documents, either temporarily or permanently, into a ‘recycling bin’, available for review or final deletion. When I first started to use a computer, I did not always understand the handbook and often had to ask Steve-next-door to come and help me. Steve was the expert who had found this particular model for me in the first place and always seemed happy to come to my aid, refusing more reward than my gratitude. Then he and his lovely family moved away.

Now imagine that, instead of another Steve, the designer himself has given you a wonderful new computer and you start to type an

important message on it. At first you can neither write nor spell properly and despite warning messages the whole script ends up off-centre, full of mistakes and unfit for purpose. Then suppose the maker himself comes along, and you shame-facedly confess to having made such a mess. He offers to clear the screen and completely empty out the recycling bin. Past errors are deleted never to be seen again. He then rewrites your work, using all his skill so that you end up with a perfectly formatted document with no errors. The work is all his, but it has your name at the top of the page. And this remarkable maker promises to stay on hand to explain the handbook and give you personal tuition and guidance in future, all with no charge to you. What a relief! Think how you would try to please him by making good progress.

For the messy script, we may think of the life created and entrusted to each of us by God. Trying to live without reference to our Maker is to head for trouble. We need more than our own ideas, or those of other people, if we are not to end up with a sub-standard result. Sadly, far too many of us like to go it alone and continue to live uncontrolled and unsatisfied lives, some more obviously messier than others. Yet through the death and resurrection of God's Son Jesus Christ, the 'screen' is cleared and a perfect document is credited to us. By trusting and accepting his offer of forgiveness and his gift of a righteous status, our past errors (and deliberate sins) are erased. We are justified, or declared to be in line with God's standards, our Maker's instructions, as found in his handbook, the Bible.

Because we cannot fully grasp or keep these new standards on our own, we need someone to come to our aid. Jesus promised that when we believe and trust in him, his Spirit comes in, ready to help and to teach without ever moving away.¹⁶ The Spirit will highlight and explain sections of the Bible that we especially need to apply to our lives. This is not an automatic process, made possible by pressing some heavenly computer key. It is an act of God's love and grace. He asks only for our response. It is not realistic to think we'll never make any more mistakes but to confess them is to find fresh forgiveness.¹⁷ We can learn from our past wrongdoings but we are not to be weighed down with guilt. The recycling bin is empty, 'remembered no more'.

Some who want to learn more about computing skills join up with a class of other interested people. The true church is not a building but a body – the company of all who believe in the resurrected Jesus and own him as their Lord.¹⁸ When we join this company we find a new worldwide family, some wiser in age and experience who would be ready to advise and pray for us. Why struggle on alone? Jesus said, ‘So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.’¹⁹ The screen has been cleared, freeing us from the burden of trying to sort it out and we are ready for a new start. The only response needed is to give ourselves back to him in repentance and gratitude for such a priceless and never ending gift.

For further thought

- Have you now got a better idea of why Jesus came and why he died?
- Do you see how important it was that God raised him from the dead?
- Have you believed, said a heartfelt ‘Sorry’ for the mess, and thanked him for his love in cleaning it all away?

Further resources

- Yancey P. *The Bible Jesus read: Why the Old Testament matters*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2002.
- Wright NT. *Justification*. London: SPCK, 2009

References

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| 1. Mark 16:19 | 11. Philippians 3:9 |
| 2. John 20:24-28 | 12. Romans 4:24- 5:2 |
| 3. Acts 2:24 | 13. Hebrews 8:12 |
| 4. 1 Corinthians 15:6 | 14. Romans 8:3-4 |
| 5. John 21:15-17 | 15. Romans 8:1 |
| 6. Luke 24:13-35 | 16. John 14:16, 26 |
| 7. John 19:25 | 17. 1 John 1:7-10 |
| 8. Isaiah 53:3-12 | 18. Romans 10:9, 13 |
| 9. John 1:29 | 19. John 8:36 |
| 10. Hebrews 10:7 | |

