**Easter Day 31st March 2024**

**Call to worship**

Alleluia! Christ is risen!
**He is risen indeed. Alleluia!**Let us celebrate with Easter joy! Not out of habit. Not thinking only about chocolate and fun, but with a brand new awareness of Christ’s presence with us as our loving and risen Lord!
Lord of the Church, Lord of our lives, and Lord of the world:
Christ is risen! Alleluia!
**He is risen indeed. Alleluia!**

**A gathering prayer**

Living Lord Jesus,
we come to worship in gratitude and joy.
Come to us, dwell with us.
Be with us as we explore the joy
that the story of your risen life brings. **Amen.**

**A prayer of approach**

Christ is risen. **Alleluia!**
The tomb is empty. **Alleluia!**
God is with us and within us. **Alleluia!**
We are an Easter people. **Alleluia!**
Christ is risen. **Alleluia!**
Alleluia! **Alleluia!**

**A prayer of adoration**

Adoration is on our lips and in our hearts as we worship on this very special day.
Adoration of our God, our risen Lord, our King and our redeemer is in our hearts.
Adoration of the risen Christ shines from within us and fills our worship –
adoration that God is in our midst, always and everywhere, now and forever.
Almighty God, Risen Christ, we adore you.
**Amen.**

**A prayer of confession and an Assurance of forgiveness**

**A prayer of confession**

We shout our alleluias; yet, within us, there are burdens of guilt and regret; there are words spoken and deeds done that ought not to have been; there are tasks of discipleship left undone; there is love not given, a smile not offered; there is rejection, denial, betrayal. On this Easter Day, we confess our failings and in resurrection life and light seek forgiveness. Risen Lord, hear our prayer.
**Amen.**

**Assurance of forgiveness**

Risen Christ, wipe away our fears and our tears. Cleanse us, renew us, refresh us, release us from all that we have confessed and let us walk with you our resurrection God, knowing that our sins are forgiven.
**Amen.**

**A prayer of thanksgiving**

*Response after each line:***Alleluia, alleluia, give thanks to our risen Lord.**

Lent and Holy Week is gone, that journey over.
Maundy Thursday called us to service and devotion.
Good Friday pained us and stained us and drained us.
Saturday stopped us in our tracks, reflecting.
Easter Day brings us resurrection that never will be over.
Christ is risen for us and within us.
Beyond the fluffy chicks and Easter eggs there is life in all its fullness.
In the midst of our joys and delight:
In the midst of suffering and pain:
God is with us, God within us.
**Alleluia, alleluia, give thanks to our risen Lord.
Amen.**

**Mark 16.1-8**

**Sermon**

The clocks went forward today. Christians believe that the resurrection of Jesus is like time moving into a different dimension. It is a shape shifting, time altering, world changing and eternity opening moment.

If its true.

Otherwise, it’s just a good story and a metaphor for wish fulfilment of our troubled world.

Justin Brierley, who is married to Lucy Brierley who is the minster of the largest URC in the country in Woking, is a presenter on Premier Christian Radio. For over ten years he has presented the Unbelievable show where he has interviewed scores of atheists and agnostics and he wrote a book saying why despite all those conversations he is still a Christian. One of the interviews was with the illusionist Derren Brown. Brown was a Christian through his teenage years. However, his faith started to wane at university where he fell in love with the stagecraft of illusion and hypnosis. Seeing the way people could be duped into false beliefs he began to wonder if the faith he had adopted would be equally self-delusional. He didn’t want to believe it on the strength of feelings but wanted to know if there were objective historical factual events.

From its inception Christianity has been a public religion making claims that could be held up to historical scrutiny. That’s not true of most other religions. The precepts of Buddhism originated in the mind of Buddha alone. The ancient writings of Hinduism derive from mystical teachings that are not located in an historical framework. Islam is constituted by the teaching and stories of the Koran as related to Mohammed in a private angelic visitation. From the outset Christianity is an eminently falsifiable religion.

Derren Brown’s beef against his inherited faith was that he didn’t think it stood up to the historical test. He told Brierley ‘*These are just sacred stories that are there to show a divine person. It’s the equivalent of a cult springing up now around a solider in World War Two who had died and been resurrected and the evidence they gave you for that was some anonymous second handwritten information in the 1980s. How seriously would you expect to take it?’*

Brierley shot back; the analogy wasn’t the same. The gospels were written down within the lifetime of Christs followers, as a product of first hand testimony not an anonymous second-hand recollection. And why would a group of God-fearing Jews invent such a strange tale at odds with their typical religious expectations and which brought so much trouble their way?

They ended their discussion agreeing to disagree.

I want to take a few elements of this basic story from Mark’s gospel, reputed to be the first gospel account, (but not the earliest New Testament account of the resurrection, for that we go to Paul’s letters).

I want to talk about a body, an empty tomb, appearances to the disciples, and fear and trembling.

They will form what is known as the minimal facts approach to the resurrection which most historians agree happened whether they are believing or non believing, Christian or not.

1. **The body**

*Verse 1: When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus’ body.*

Jesus death on the cross is undisputed by historians. It is found not only in the gospels but in other contemporary writers. Interestingly the main pushback on the historicity of the crucifixion has come not from those who claim the story of Jesus is just a myth, but from Muslims.

Although Islam affirms that Jesus was a prophet sent by Allah, the Koran claims that he did not die on a cross. Many Muslims believe that a substitute for Christ died in his place. Nabeel Qureshi was a convert from Islam to Christianity, a genuine one, not a bogus asylum seeker playing the system, He described a turning point in his quest for the truth about Jesus when he realized the Koran’s position on the crucifixion and the death of Jesus was historically indefensible. It opened up to him the possibility that Christian claims about the resurrection could also be true.

1. **The empty tomb**

*Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb 3and they asked each other, ‘Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?’*

*4But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away*

All four gospels record that a group of Jesus’ female followers discovered his empty tomb on the first day of the week. Not only does this lend the story the historical weight of multiple attestation but it also gives it what is known as the ‘criterion of embarrassment’.

A recorded story is more likely to be true if it would have been embarrassing or inconvenient to those telling it. The sort of stories that we are likely to invent or exaggerate tend to be those that make us look better, not worse.

In all four gospel accounts the first people to happen upon the empty tomb are women. In the patriarchal culture of first century Israel female testimony was worth far less than that of a man. If the gospel writers had intended to pull the wool over their readers eyes it would have made far more sense to place the male disciples as the first arrivals at the empty tomb not Mary Magdalene and her companions. The most plausible reason they included it is because that was how it happened.

1. **Appearances to the disciples**

*As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed.*

*6‘Don’t be alarmed,’ he said. ‘You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. 7But go, tell his disciples and Peter, “He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.”’*

That the followers of Jesus reported experiences of meeting Christ after his death is, again, widely agreed across believing and non believing scholars. Could these reported experiences have arisen by legendary word of mouth, in a historical version of Chinese whispers. The historical records don’t support such an idea.

In 1 Corinthians 15, one of the earliest accounts of the resurrection we have, Paul quotes a creed of the church saying how Christ appeared to his disciples and five hundred people and even to his brother James. Paul wrote this letter in 55 AD and was quoting a long-established tradition from the very inception of the Christian Church.

The angelic man by the tomb had promised that people would see the risen Jesus. There were some early significant converts who became followers of Jesus.

Most notably Paul who was a persecutor of the first Christians but who was confronted by the Risen Christ and because the main missionary for the Christian cause in the first century, a fact attested by extra biblical sources such as Clement of Rome, Polycarp, Tertullian, Dionysius of Corinth.

In similar fashion James the brother of Jesus was a sceptic of Jesus’ ministry and movement. You can imagine the brother of Jesus saying that infamous line from Monty Pythons Life of Brian. He’s not the messiah he’s just a naughty boy’. Yet James was listed as encountering the risen Christ and went on to set up the Jerusalem church and was martyred for his belief in Christ as recorded by extra biblical sources such as Josephus, Hegesippus and Clement of Alexandira. If you can convince your brother then surely that takes some doing.

James and Paul had been hostile witnesses against the Christian faith but through their conversion became key witnesses from the defence. Again, this fact is affirmed by most historians, both Christian and non-Christian.

But what was the decisive factor in the conversion of those who were otherwise hostile to Christ?

The explosive growth of the Christian church needs an explanation too.

Figures with messianic claims were not uncommon in first century Judea. Other preachers drew their own followers. The only difference is that when their leaders were killed by the Romans those followers either went home or found themselves a new Messiah. What they didn’t do was immediately begin to proclaim that their Messiah had risen from the dead.

It was a very un-Jewish thing to claim, as Jews believed in a general resurrection from the dead at the end of time. There was no expectation of individuals, much less the Messiah, being raised before then. It would have been a strange thing to make up in order to persuade fellow jews.

But this is what this group of dejected, defeated, and crushed disciples, who had lost their leader to a brutal humiliating death at the hands of the Roman overlords did. They suddenly became a group of bold extraordinarily confident people willing to be rejected by their Jewish culture and experience beating, persecution and death for their beliefs. In the process the church grew phenomenally: again another fact well established across historical research.

What transformative event explains all that? There seems to be a resurrection shaped hole at the centre of the early church’s growth.

These then are some of the historical facts agreed upon by the majority of both believing and non-believing historians. When presented with a set of facts and evidence we must ask ourselves the question: ‘what is the best explanation?’

My New Testament tutor at college has gone on to be an internally recognised biblical scholar. I had nothing to do with that by the way. But she remained agnostic about the resurrection. She knew all the evidence suggested it but as a historian she could not countenance a miraculous explanation for historical events. Whatever the evidence may suggest. Whilst she had no interest in knocking people’s personal faith commitments, she couldn’t infer supernatural conclusions herself. As a historian I cannot prove miraculous claims she said.

Bart Ehrman was an evangelical Christian but became an agnostic because of the list of differences in the gospel accounts of the resurrection which he thought doubted their reliability. The counter to that as Mike Licona on an Unbelievable podcast dialogue with Ehrman said: *It’s a bit like the Titanic. There were conflicting accounts from the survivors, such as whether the ship broke in half before sinking or whether it went down in its entirety. But on one called into question whether the titanic sunk or not. It was the peripheral details that were in question. It’s the same thing with the New Testament. They have no impact on the fundamental truth of the resurrection.*

But Ehrman, a man of the academy, said ‘*you’ve moved from history to faith. You can show historically that people claimed they saw Jesus alive afterwards; you can draw the conclusion that they probably believed it. But if you yourself agree that Jesus was raised from the dead, you are saying that was an act of God in history. What you are doing is no longer history – its faith.*

And there’s the rub.

**My final point:**

1. **Fear and trembling**

***8****Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone because they were afraid.*

For some scholars, no explanation (including those with supernatural implications) should be off limits. But others like my New Testament Tutor and Bart Ehrman will always insist that the standard rules of historical enquiry – which excludes miracles by definition – can’t be suspended for Christian believers. No matter how well the minimal facts suggest the resurrection happened, the explanation must be explicable in naturalistic terms. A naturalistic explanation will always supersede a supernatural one. Change those rules and we’d have to let in all sorts of miraculous claims from history. We wouldn’t know who to rely on. The status quo would be in danger., the predictable rule of force and the power of empire would be jeopardized; the system where the rich and powerful control the poor and justice favours the ones at the top of the pile could be overturned. Nothing is predictable as soon as a dead man comes back to life.

No wonder the women fled from the tomb trembling and in bewilderment because of the consequences of what had happened.

If we begin with the assumption that there is no God, then no amount of evidence will ever lead to the conclusion that Jesus was raised from the dead. But if we grant the possibility that there is a God, then the explanation that God raised Jesus from the dead would be I would argue, the best fit for all the data we have but also send out a message of the possibility of transformation, of eternal justice, of love from which nothing, not even death can separate us and that God can and will put right the world that is so badly broken.

Yes, you need faith.

If you haven’t got it – do you want it? Would you ask God for it? Would you ask God to help you? Pray the sceptic prayer – God if you are there convince me? Send your Holy Spirit to help me know that you are there.

If you are desperate for a new start. Desperate for a break from addictions, bad habits, hopelessness lack of meaning and purpose – pray for God to pour his love into your hearts by the Holy Spirit, the same power that raised Jesus from the dead – the same power that can raise you to new life and kiss your guilt and shame away and bring you joy, the joy of knowing you are loved and in the presence of the Risen Lord.

Trembling? Bewildered? By God you should be. This is shape shifting, time altering, world changing and eternity opening stuff.

Alleluia Christ is Risen. He is risen indeed alleluia!

**Prayers of intercession**

**Today we remember again that Jesus came to bring peace and hope.**

We remember Jesus as he walked the lands and territories of the Middle East, and we think of those lands now. We think of the conflict still raging in Gaza, and the untold lives lost. We think of the people in despair and desperation, who have no hope and no direction. We think of the leaders who refuse to negotiate or who put barriers in the way of peace.

God of all, we ask for peace to be found, for access to be given so that the most needy may be helped and food and shelter provided. We pray that you would bring positive change in that region, and that the peace and hope of Jesus would be known.

**Today we remember again that Jesus came to bring peace and hope.**

We remember the Jesus who spoke truth and worked for good. We think of the nations, businesses, systems, and individuals that are threatened and undermined by cyber-attacks, false rumours, negative social media, and fake news. We think of our own nation as we approach elections in a few weeks that we hope will be fair and democratic. We think of those who are easily influenced by people who would do them harm through conspiracy theories, lies and bullying on social media.

God of all, we ask for wisdom in nations and institutions so that democracy and freedom can continue free from harm by those who would cause damage and disruption. We pray that you would protect and heal all children, young people and adults who are negatively influenced by social media, and those affected would find peace and hope.

**Today we remember again that Jesus came to bring peace and hope.**

We remember Jesus as he shared his guidance, spoke up for the weakest and made lives better. We think of those who live in our communities who face challenge, pain and hardship. We think of those who have no home or security, who face financial despair and who have no one to turn to. We think of those who have been led into addiction and can find no way out. We think of our friends and neighbours who face illness and fear, who have lost those close to them, and who feel darkness in their lives.

God of all, we ask that you would show your love and compassion for all whose lives are in trouble today and who find little to celebrate this Easter. We pray that all in need would feel your presence with them and that you would show us what we can do to work for you in changing lives and helping those around us. We pray that your peace and hope would be real to those whose lives are tough.

**Today we remember again that Jesus came to bring peace and hope.**

We remember Jesus as he led his disciples and taught them by example and challenge. We think of leaders of our nation, our area, and our church. We think of those whose lives are under close scrutiny such as the royal family, those who make big decisions that change the lives of others and those with responsibility to lead people in living safely, or worshipping well. We think of ourselves as Easter people, called to live our lives knowing that Jesus is with us and following his example of life and service.

God of all, we ask that you would bless all those who have leadership roles with your grace, generosity, compassion and the strength to do their work well. We pray for our government, our local councils, and our church leadership, that all may seek wisdom and understanding from you. We pray for ourselves, that we would be your servants in all we do. We ask that the new life of the season would be seen in us at home, school, work, and in our community. May we both know and share the peace and hope of Jesus.

**Today we remember again that Jesus came to bring peace and hope. Amen.**

**A prayer for all ages together**

Exciting Jesus, bless us with joy this Easter.
Amazing Jesus, fill us with wonder this Easter.
Saviour Jesus, make us thankful this Easter.
Teacher Jesus, give us wisdom and faith this Easter.
Risen Jesus, bless us your Easter people today and always.
**Amen.**

**A sending out prayer**

Easter joy is to be shared,
to be grown, to be treasured.
As we go out into the world and a new week,
may that joy be our strength, our inspiration,
and our refuge in trouble.
**Amen.**