

**Resurrection Faith: the Basis of Mission**  
**John 20:19-31**  
***April 28, 2015***

In the Christian calendar the Easter season extends through to May 26<sup>th</sup>, followed by the celebration of the ascension on May 30<sup>th</sup>. For many of our churches, however, the Easter celebration, marked by the scent of new blooms and special music, fades into the background of our worship. As many would argue Easter is the central and most important event in the calendar, far greater than Christmas or any other season. So why do we pass it by so quickly and easily?

In his book, **The Challenge of Jesus**, N.T. Wright speaks of the Easter event of resurrection in this way

*...there is no evidence for a form of early Christianity in which the resurrection was not a central belief...It was the central driving force, informing the whole movement. (p.133)*

The question I would pose today is this: How does the N.T. teaching on the centrality of the resurrection inform our mission? I would suggest that the N.T. is clear: the resurrection of Jesus is the defining truth that motivated the early church to reach out in mission. Is it for us?

But first let's be clear on what we believe the N.T. teaches us about resurrection. There does seem to be a common misunderstanding of what the Apostles and Jesus taught. I often hear people in the church say this about the after death experience: *it means going to heaven when you die.*

But is that really what the early Christians believed and is contained in their Scriptures called the New Testament? Wright says:

*resurrection was not a general word for "life after death" or for "going to be with God" in some general sense. It was the word for what happened when God created newly embodied human beings. In short, resurrection always meant re-embodiment.*

That's why when Martha is confronted with the question about resurrection by Jesus in John 11 she responded so confidently that of course her brother "would rise again at the resurrection on the last day." To which Jesus responded: ***I am the resurrection and the life!***

To begin with the disciples had trouble with this idea that Jesus had been resurrected. That's why they are still huddled in that room. They hadn't believed the women. The doors are locked, the windows shut tight and they are all in the room except Thomas. Suddenly Jesus is standing there larger than life. He brings peace. He showed them the evidence that it was truly him: his scars are visible.

Now I wonder where Thomas went? Why is he not there with them? Any ideas? Perhaps he has gone on a coffee run! Or perhaps he has given up on the Jesus movement. Thomas, after all, was a pragmatic sort of man. Remember when Jesus spoke to the disciples about going to prepare a place for them it was Thomas who spoke up and said: *Lord we don't know where you are going. How can we know the way?* Down to earth, direct, pragmatic, that's Thomas.

Perhaps the disciples caught up with Thomas during the week and tried to persuade him to come back. But he is adamant:

*Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.*

My hunch is that few, if any, ever live without doubt. It's simply part of our experience as Christians and is written deeply into the experience of God's people throughout history. Even the greatest of saints were stalked by doubt: Abraham, Moses, Elijah and Jeremiah. But doubt is also the seedbed of faith. Many of us, at some point in our lives are just hanging on to faith with our fingernails.

I remember very well the experience of giving my first sermon. My friend Jack was moving to the States to do further study and asked me to preach for him. It was a hot summer morning when I arrived at the Goodwood Baptist church, about forty kilometers north of Toronto. This was my first preaching experience and I was incredible nervous. Doubt saturated my being. Being early I thought a walk

down the back lane might calm me. But it didn't. Because it was summer the congregation had the service in the small basement. No pipe organ, no choir, no stained glass windows, no large crowd, and no encouraging singing. They were just a tiny group of farm and village folk whose simplicity was endearing. Doubt swirled around in my belly that morning, as it has done a hundred times since. But God was present! I was invited to preach there for the next two years. I grew in my faith through that experience of doubt.

What moved Thomas from doubt to faith? The following Sunday they are again locked away in their secret hideout, but this time Thomas is with them. The disciples have persuaded him to join them and see for himself that Jesus is indeed alive. And just as if someone has pressed the replay button Jesus once again is present in the room; physical walls are no longer a barrier to the resurrected body. Thomas, "thrust your finger in here; check out my wound with your whole hand. Don't doubt me Thomas, I am real," says Jesus. Do you hear the tone of voice? It sounds to me loving, empathetic, endearing, and winsome.

I know, I know, he had a huge advantage. Thomas saw Jesus with his own eyes. He had his proof standing right in front of him. We, on the other hand, have no such physical presence as proof. Thomas falls down in awe and worship. Jesus says:

*Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe. (John 20:29)*

Just think Jesus had people like you and me in mind who would come to faith long after he had disappeared from physical sight. We are among those who would believe without seeing him.

This resurrection appearance story reminds us that Jesus is a reembodied person. He has not simply died and gone off to heaven as a soul or spirit. What has occurred is a bodily resurrection. Paul in his letter to the Corinthian church calls this a spiritual body. It has characteristics of his physical body (they know it is him) and he is certainly not a ghost or spirit, but a real, live person. But he is also able to defy the laws of gravity and atomic structures. He appears and disappears at will.

This takes us to the very heart of the Christian faith. Without resurrection Paul says we are just as well to adopt the pagan philosophy: “eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die”. Jesus opens up for us the hope of a real bodily existence in the life to come.

And finally, this hope, this truth of resurrection, the heartbeat of the New Testament, is for us to share and witness to in the world. Our mission flows out of this amazing new message of God’s kingdom present and real. Jesus is alive, resurrected as the firstborn of all who sleep. Last Sunday I quoted the hymn I discovered in St George’s Cathedral in Jerusalem. It’s worth quoting the first stanza again today:

*If Christ had not been raised from death our faith would be in vain,  
our preaching but a waste of breath, our sin and guilt remain. But now  
the Lord is risen indeed; he rules in earth and heaven; his gospel  
meets a world of need-in Christ we are forgiven.*

**Amen**