

The Melbourne Anglican: Why Did Jesus Rise?

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It seems particularly appropriate to be asking the question of why Jesus Christ rose from the dead while we are still celebrating Easter. But, of course, the liturgical season of Easter is simply a reminder of what we celebrate each Sunday of the year when we come together to meet our Risen Lord.

The resurrection, like the cross, is one of the great and central mysteries of Christian faith; indeed they are part of the one, saving reality. We can, however, draw out several themes, in the knowledge that no words can exhaust its meaning.

In the first place, the resurrection represents God's re-creation of the world. God's first words in the making of the world are: 'Let there be light', the first words spoken in the Bible, the first words of creation (Gen 1:3). On Easter Day, the first word of God's new creation is Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh (Jn 1:14), the one who is the Light of the world, bringing light from darkness (Jn 8:12).

The resurrection indicates, in other words, God's transformation of creation. Just as God made the world by his creative word, so God will re-make it through the same Word. The resurrection is the first indication of God's re-creation for all who have faith in Christ (2 Cor 5:17). Sunday, the first day of the week, is the first day of God's new creation.

Secondly, the resurrection points not just to spiritual realities but also to earthly ones. It shows the importance of the body and material reality. Christians do not believe in a vague, disembodied spirituality. We believe that Jesus was materially raised from the dead: not revived as a resuscitated corpse but, more radically, raised to a new life in a transformed body, a 'spiritual body', no longer subject to the limitations of space and time (1 Cor 15:42-49).

The women disciples who come to the tomb on Easter morning find it empty. They encounter not a dead body, as they expected, but astonishingly an empty tomb and a living Lord whom they can see, hear and touch (Matt 28:9; Jn 20:16-17). They bear witness to the reality and tangibility of the resurrection.

In affirming the body, the resurrection also affirms the whole of creation. In his rising from the dead, Christ is the 'first-born of all creation' (Col 1:15). Sometimes people assume that Christians have no time for the body or material reality, no time for social or environmental issues. We are only supposed to be concerned with 'saving souls'. But the resurrection challenges that view. Matter matters to God, who created it and will re-create it.

The resurrection implies, therefore, that issues of health, ecology, political structures and community welfare, are all as much a part of the hope of the gospel as individual spirituality. That is the promise of the resurrection, the promise of transformation of all that God has made, all that makes created life possible and meaningful.

Thirdly, the resurrection spells God's triumph over death and all the forces of sin, evil and violence within and around us. In nature, death has the last word on our lives, and the lives of those we love: the great and final No on us and all created things. But the resurrection transforms the natural order. It shows that death is not the last word after all. God has the last word, and God's word is a triumphant Yes to us and to creation in the face of sin, suffering and death (Rom 8:19-23).

Because of the resurrection, death now becomes a penultimate reality, a second-last but not final reality. It remains difficult and painful for us and those we love, and we experience a natural sense of fear, loss and grief. But there is no room for despair now that Christ is risen from the dead. Our hope is in God's joyful and unexpected Yes in the resurrection, in and beyond all sin, all evil, all death.

Just as God has the first word on our lives, by bringing us into being, so God's word will be the last on our lives - not death but God; not No but Yes. This triumph means that we live in hope: hope in God and the Yes of God, which is spoken to us in Jesus Christ and his rising from the dead.

The resurrection, moreover, is not only the promise of God's future. It also makes all the difference to our present. The resurrection is not an airy-fairy dream for the end of the world. It is as much about living in that hope in the here-and-now (Jn 11:25-27), knowing that God will remain faithful to us and to creation, in life and in death. It is about living by faith in God now: a covenant God whose word and promise in Jesus Christ are true.

The resurrection, therefore, calls us first and foremost to the transforming worship of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Worship is the primary vocation of the Church. Along with Mary Magdalene and the 'other Mary', we fall at the feet of our risen, conquering Saviour (Matt 28:9), who has 'trampled down death by death'. Love and worship of God - this God, the God of resurrection and new life - come before everything else.

The resurrection also means that we are commissioned in the Church to proclaim the message of the resurrection in word and deed. It is a call to mission and to action, proclaiming the message of forgiveness and renewal, and working for God's new world in self-giving love of others, in cherishing the earth, in struggling for justice, kindness, reconciliation, peace.

Jesus rose from the dead to transform us, so that we can live out our baptism by dying and rising with Christ (Rom 6:4). This transformation begins with our worship each Sunday, the commemoration of Easter Day in word and sacrament, the day on which we acclaim Jesus as our 'Lord and God' (Jn 20:28-29). Each day of the week thereafter we are called to proclaim, and participate in, God's re-creation of the world in Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, in joyful faith, hope and love.

