

'Resurrection and Life' Easter Day 2016

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'What kind of a world is this?' Ever find yourself asking that question? .

Daily on our TV we are given the latest, depressing & distressing statistics of loss of life.

The world seems beset by death & destruction – suicide bombers carry out awful atrocities, threat of terror seems to be on all sides, let alone our own personal lives, in which old age brings failing faculties & indignity for a loved one. And in midst of our own bereavement & tragedies, pain & distress seem all around. Small wonder, then if we too don't find ourselves saying *'what kind of world is this?'*

'What kind of a world is this?' On Good Friday there seemed a simple answer to the question. A Good Friday world is one in which the best is extinguished by the worst, where hope is destined to deceive, and where dreams are illusions that end in tragedy. At dawn on the 1st Easter Day, Mary was still in a Good Friday world, as she approached the tomb of Jesus. She is seeking Jesus among the dead, where all her + the other disciples' hopes have ended up.

But there in that Easter garden, her world & OUR world changes. Once more, Mary & every disciple since are in the presence of Christ – a changed, risen Christ who changes us & the world forever.

And it this tension that we have to keep in balance this Easter season, the tension of living out our Easter faith in 'a Good Friday world.'

Upon hearing her name spoken in that Easter garden, Mary's world was transformed.

Her Easter morning world is now one in which miracles & wonders happen. It's a world where **powerless love** overcomes **loveless power**, a world in which life is stronger than death.

So, the question for each one of us on THIS Eastertide 2016 is – can WE really believe this to be the case – that, despite appearances to the contrary, even this morning, this IS an Easter world? Is the resurrection hope real & how can we know it's all true? **What is OUR RESPONSE to the Resurrection?**

DISMISS it? There are different ways in which we can approach the Easter story. Philosopher Anthony Grayling, Richard Dawkins & Philip Pulman dismiss the Easter story with a wave of their word processors. They confine the Gospel accounts of Resurrection of Jesus to all other, similar resurrection 'myths' from other cultures & religions. Christianity is but one more to add to the collection. That's the rational, atheist view this Easter morning. It's just a story to cheer us up at the end of the winter, or even one that somehow has combined the events of 'life' returning to the earth in the Spring with someone called Jesus who lived 2000 years ago.

Belief in the resurrection of Jesus can be put alongside belief in Father Christmas, the Tooth Fairy or the Easter Bunny! (Apologies to those who still believe in all three!)

DISPROVE it? If do not actually dismiss events of Easter out of hand totally, then next stage would be to try & prove/disprove it historically. Certainly, something happened. On Good Friday it was clear that it was simply a matter of *'They think it's all over – it is now'*. Disciples went home & hid away.

'We thought he was the one' = Cleopas' thoughts on Emmaus Road

But then, everything changed – promise-making, promise-breaking Peter, so fearful on that Thursday night & Good Friday, suddenly after Easter, is so aflame with faith that he becomes the leader of the NT church community.

Indeed, all the other disciples demonstrate such huge transformations of character & enthusiasm for Jesus Christ – their risen Lord, that their behaviour is inexplicable, unless something traumatic & extraordinary had taken place in their lives.

They themselves were quite clear about what had happened to them. They had found Jesus among the living, not the dead. And for them, that was enough – aided by the One whom Jesus had promised would help – the Helper, the Holy Spirit himself.

But is that enough proof for us? A small group of followers become convinced that Jesus is alive after all. Yes, but that could be put down to mass hysteria or hallucinations couldn't it? They WANTED to believe that Jesus was alive, so they convinced themselves that's what must have happened. You can argue that's what took place, although the gospels don't record it like that at all.

Let's be frank, if we came across this account of Jesus' resurrection anywhere else but in the gospels, would WE believe it ourselves? It was like that for Mary here in John 20, at first. ***'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb and we don't know where they have put him!'*** That's Mary's initial reaction – and it would probably have been ours too. Body laid in grave on Friday afternoon (**John 19vv38-42**) – body gone from grave early Sunday morning = someone must have moved the body.

'They have taken the Lord...' = Mary's reaction to the empty tomb, and surely, it's our reaction too. Even if we could prove the empty tomb, it actually proves nothing. Mary stands outside, weeping, still in a Good Friday world.

Remind ourselves it was ***'a large stone'*** (**Matt 27v60**). 1-2 tons rolled downwards in a groove + ***'a guard & a seal'*** (**Matt 27 vv65 & 66**). ‘

Who Moved the Stone? Frank Morison, who set out to disprove the resurrection. Instead found he came to meet with the risen Jesus himself.

Dismiss? > Disprove ? >

DISCOVER it – what changes everything for Mary is ‘*what happens next*’ as they say on ‘*Question of Sport*’.

There, in that Easter garden, she meets with the risen Lord Jesus Christ. It is **that** moment of recognition, which comes from Jesus calling Mary by name...

So, too with each one of us. You can study all the history & theology you like. You can research the background to the gospels, carry out historical reconstructions, and weigh up all the arguments for/against, but what makes this morning REAL, what makes Christianity real, what makes JC REAL is when WE meet HIM – when HE calls US by OUR name too.

So what makes **me** believe that God raised Jesus from the dead, might well be supported by historical evidence, gospel accounts & a study of theology, (including 3 years ministry training & prep at Bristol Baptist College). But my belief in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ is based first & foremost on the experience of MY OWN resurrection of Jesus in my own life.

Back in my early 30s, I’d known ABOUT Jesus most of my life. I’d attended Sunday School (in the afternoons) at Wombourn Congregational Church, joined the young people’s group (until age 14) - then stopped altogether.

It was only when - some 17/18 years later - I MET the living Jesus via the WORSHIP, TEACHING & FELLOWSHIP of my local Baptist Church in Cambs. that I came to know Jesus HERE as well as here. And that short journey from HEAD to HEART is a very difficult one for some/many perhaps. It cannot be forced, manufactured or manipulated. Or, rather, it CAN be all three of those but such a Faith will founder. It has to be PERSONAL, born of the Holy Spirit & carried out in FAITH.

Some years ago a college teacher in Oregon USA, named Marcus Borg wrote a book called ‘*Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*’.

The book was prompted by an invitation Borg had received to speak to a men's church group, meeting every week for 10 years. *'Talk to us about Jesus, make it personal'*. Borg, the scholar, had never done that before. He'd given hundreds of lectures **about** Jesus, but nobody had ever said, *'make it personal'*.

In nutshell, Borg had come through time in teens when God had no longer been real to him, to a living faith in JC based, not on second hand beliefs, but on first hand experience.

In that process, the unconvinced academic discovered himself giving his heart, in his own words, *'to the post Easter Jesus, who is the living Lord'*.

And THAT, essentially, is what happens to Mary in John 20 here. She comes looking for a dead man, and instead meets Jesus *'again'* for the first time. Jesus asks Mary for whom she is looking. HE knows perfectly well, of course, but Jesus is not teasing someone in midst of her grief & loss.

Jesus simply wants Mary herself to make the discovery, as have Christians ever since, including, I guess, the majority of this congregation here on this 'Low Sunday' post Easter morning today.

Have YOU heard risen Lord Jesus Christ calling YOUR name?
If so, what is YOUR RESPONSE?