

The Resurrection

Mark 16:108

Acts 10:34-43

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

What a strange way to end a gospel:

They said nothing to anyone for they were afraid.

What a strange way to end the Good News of Jesus Christ. The early church clearly felt the same for someone added a few more verses to bring Mark's gospel to a more acceptable conclusion. But the most important manuscripts end with those words 'they were afraid' and most biblical scholars agree that that was where Mark ended. Why did he stop there? The obvious explanation is that he did not need to go any further. His readers knew the rest of the story. They were living it. Mark only needed to tell the background to how they got to their present way of life. Mark was the first gospel to be written and his successors, Matthew, John and especially Luke give us detailed accounts of how the disciples met the risen Christ. They do this because they are writing later and the appearances of the risen Christ are no longer fresh in peoples' memories. But in the end very few people feel the need to write history books about the present.

This strange ending is also a rebuttal of the claim, made from the time of Jesus onwards, that the resurrection was a fabrication by the disciples. No-one who wanted to make up a story about a dead man rising from the dead would report the fear and silence of the disciples let alone end on that note. The most obvious conclusion is that Mark was telling it as it was. The disciples were afraid; and they had also heard the news about the resurrection.

Despite the downbeat ending, Mark still manages to include the key piece of Good News: Jesus has been raised: he is not here.

That message is unpacked a little more in the readings from both Acts and 1 Corinthians. In Acts St Luke gives us an account of an address by

Peter in Caesarea, some fifty miles north of Jerusalem, on the Mediterranean coast. It is, in fact a mini biography of Jesus which ends with a short account of his resurrection appearances:

God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead.

Act 10:40-42

Paul's letter to the Corinthians focuses not only on historical facts but also on how the events of AD 33 in Jerusalem were a fulfillment of scripture:

Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.

1 Cor 15:4-7

He prefaces this with the words 'I handed on to you...what I had in turn received' emphasizing that this is not first hand knowledge but what he has been told to him by others. This is the nature of the church's tradition – that key beliefs are passed down from each generation and affirmed by each generation as being true. This raises an important question of how we know it is true and, even more important, how others might know that it is true.

The first thing to say is that we cannot argue others into belief. We cannot prove the resurrection of Christ and, even if we could, all that we would prove is that a very strange thing happened in the first century middle east. As the late Bishop David Jenkins so pithily put it, all we would have proved is 'a conjuring trick with bones.' The real meat is not

that Jesus rose from the dead but that he died for my sins and that my life is irrevocably changed as a result.

So how do we know that Jesus is risen from the dead? Paul's letter to the Corinthians makes an important point

Last of all... he appeared to me.

You may be familiar with the story of the conversion of Paul – or Saul as he was known until then. He was a devout Jew, totally committed to the persecution of Christians who, he believed, were making a mockery of his faith. On his way to Damascus, to persecute more Christians, he was blinded by a powerful light and became a follower of the same Jesus Christ whose followers he had been determined to remove from the face of the earth. The persecutor became the persecuted. Not only was Saul not argued into conversion, it was almost as if he himself had no part in it. The initiative was God's and all Saul had to do was respond – which he did. I have never had a conversion experience anything like that of Saul but I too would acknowledge that my faith owes as much to the initiative of God as it does to any effort of my own.

But perhaps the most important witness to Jesus Christ is not what we say but what we do. In the fifth chapter of Acts there is a telling summary of the life of the early Christians:

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold.

Acts 5:32-35

Could it be that the reason the church grew so rapidly in its first years was that people saw the quality of its members lives and were attracted to it? What they saw was quite simply the Body of Christ. The qualities

that thousands had seen in Jesus for three years were now being seen by tens of thousands across the whole Roman Empire. We should not see the early church through rose tinted spectacles. There are examples to the contrary in Galatia to whom Paul wrote:

If you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.

Gal 5:15

And in Corinth:

For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations? For when one says, "I belong to Paul," and another, "I belong to Apollos," are you not merely human?

1 Cor 3:4

But the nub is that when early Christians strayed from the course of love there were capable leaders to rebuke them and set a different way of life before them.

On matters of unity and disunity Paul compares the body of Christ to a human body; every member of the body has a role, a purpose and no part of the Body of Christ is more important than another. That means that in our own church life those who carry out menial tasks out of public view are no less important than those who are 'front of house' as it were. So if the latter feel unvalued then Paul boosts them up; but if those with prominent roles become arrogant then Paul deflates them.

But he also writes about the kind of people we should be:

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Gal 5:23

And in his letter to the Corinthians he makes the extraordinary claim that no matter what amazing talents we might have for preaching, teaching,

administration, healing – if their use is not motivated by love they are worth nothing.

And in taking this line he is going no further than Jesus. After Jesus had washed his disciples feet he told them:

Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.

John 13:12-15

And then said

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.

John 15:12-13

The early Christians did this and their numbers rocketed.

So the resurrection comes down to some very practical stuff. The proof that Jesus is alive is that the Christian church lives as he showed us and as he taught us. The proof of the resurrection is found not here in church on a Sunday morning but out there in the world where Christians serve Monday to Saturday. And the most important words in the mass are the last ones:

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.
God in the peace of Christ.

N Clews
1st April 2018