



Read the Archbishop's sermon at the Easter Day Sung Eucharist at Canterbury Cathedral, at 11am on 9th April 2023

Readings: Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 28:1-10

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is an event in history. It happened on a certain day, just as one might remember that the Battle of Hastings happened on a certain day. It had monumental consequences in all that has happened since. It changed the lives of those who were its witnesses, the lives of those to whom they witnessed, the history of Empires, the calendar, ethics, philosophy and all human history since, in one way or another. Within weeks, weeks, it had led to the start of the church, which is now in every country, with over two billion people. And the church had spread peacefully through the Roman Empire long before the tragedy of armies marching out, thinking they were doing so in the name of Christ.

And yet many people treat it as a meaningful myth, not an event. So why should we believe it? Why should we believe that that happened?

Well, there's numerous reasons but here's a few to start with. We believe it because the body of Jesus was never found. If it had been there, it could so easily have been used to disprove the claims of the disciples. 'He has not risen. Here he is. Here's his body!'

We believe it because if the disciples had stolen the body - one of the stories going around at the beginning - someone would have talked. Look how hard it is for a secret to be kept in any organisation. Put that secret, this extraordinary secret, in the hands of avowedly weak and frightened and powerless people and imagine how likely it would be to remain a secret. They weren't brave, these early disciples. They would have told people as soon as they were put under pressure and questioned. The main leaders were not naturally good people: one was bribed and eleven ran away or denied Jesus. And there were hundreds of other witnesses.

We believe it because there was never a tomb to go to and remember and honour Christ. It's what we do with people who've died. We put up tombs and we remember people that way. There is one for St. Peter in Rome. You can find it (surprise, surprise) by going to St. Peter's Church in Rome and it's about 50 foot down, under the high altar. I've been there.

And look round this cathedral, look at how many monuments there are to people of all sorts.

If anyone knew where Jesus had been buried it would be marked dramatically.

But we believe it because the witnesses sound real. They're not made up to bring credibility. The first one, and the first ones, are women and in those days, they didn't count for much (that's a good thing that's changed) and their evidence was in law worth half that of a man. The others were poor and little-educated lay people, not priests or Kings or lawyers doing affidavits and sworn notarised statements.

We believe it because the disciples - these cowards, these run-aways, these 'I've never known him' types - were so changed three days later.

Something literally out of this world had changed them.

We believe it because people ever since have been changed, that they know this person Jesus, love him and give their lives for the truth of the resurrection, including millions around the world today, and in a week's time at the Orthodox Easter.

It was wonderful to hear the epistle in Urdu, even if like me you don't speak a word, because it is a reminder that in Pakistan today there are churches who meet in the fear of being shot or bombed or harried or tortured and hurt. And why do they meet? Because Jesus is alive.



We believe it because although the global church has shown its sin and its foolishness, and although the global church has been a place of suffering, again and again since its birth 2000 years ago it has found renewal and new courage. Indeed, the Church today, our own Church of England, still finds renewal, repentance for old and new failures, fresh life and new growth, again and again. And for all these reasons and many more it is my surest conviction and belief that when they're all put together, they give every cause for us to believe that the resurrection of Jesus

from the dead is among the most certain facts in history.

But what difference does it make if we don't have huge gatherings to remember the Battle of Hastings or Julius Caesar's assassination or other events of a 1000 or 2000 years ago? The impact is that it changes everyone and everything today: us, and anyone who opens their lives to the life of Christ, the living Christ, who is with us by His Spirit as we sit here today.

One of the impacts is that meeting Christ is why Christians long for others to know this extraordinary God of love who became human, became like us, so that for all eternity we might live and become like him. Because of the resurrection the Church speaks of eternal values that didn't die with Christ but rose with him. Values revealed in the living Christ, and we speak of them even when they are politically uncomfortable, generally unpopular or treated with derision.

For example, I had a large number of letters in February and March complaining because the Church Commissioners (the body that been holding onto the Church's money for around 321 years, which Queen Anne gave us), who hold and invest it, announced in January that they were going to set aside £100 million for a social impact investment fund. The income from which would be used to help communities in this country and around the world affected by the fact that the Church Commissioners, in the 17th ,18th and early 19th century, invested in slavery. Some in fact owned slaves. And the living reality of Christ compels us to consider and respond to those actions that deny the reality of God's power and love.

It's not post-colonial guilt, ambivalent wokery, it is the living presence of Christ, alive in our church and in our lives, who treats us all, high and low, important and unknown, exactly the same. And in the past, slave and free. And today.

The resurrection of Jesus is claimed by Christians to be the turning point for the whole world, individually, collectively and for the whole of creation, always and everywhere. From the finality of death, a new beginning was made in the empty tomb. The certainty of final endings, of that ending being death finally, is over because of the resurrection of Jesus.

And without that resurrection there are simply endings. Look at it through those who were its witnesses:

For Peter, it would be the end of any chance of forgiveness for his cowardice and betrayal at the High Priest's house.

For Mary Magdalene, it would be the end of a friendship where she was valued, having importance and dignity.

For us gathering here – well we wouldn't be, would we? Because nobody would have built a cathedral to a dead Jewish peasant, who'd been dead for 1000 years when they started doing it.

The resurrection is not just an event in history. It is the most powerful event in history: our past history, the history we are living today, and the history we are yet to know.

And we see it around us in all corners of the world. We see it in cold, dead relationships that find warmth again after years of hurt and estrangement. We see it in the millions who've heard the call of Christ and repented, changed direction of their lives and sought to walk in a different way, In conflicts reconciled, and hatreds overcome. We see it in the 35,000 social projects that the Church of England is involved in, in this country alone. In England alone.

In the last few months, in Mozambique, where Caroline and I were in November, out of love for the risen Christ and knowing His call and faithfulness, Christians worked with the United Nations to set up 200 peace clubs in partnership with Muslim leaders so as to provide a force of life and hope against the death cult of Isis operating in Cabo Delgado, the northern part of Mozambique. And those clubs have made a difference. The Christians did it because Christ is alive.

This weekend we remember The Belfast Agreement of 25 years ago, and the extraordinary and courageous work of so many men and women involved in reaching it, high and low.

The political courage required more recently to produce the Windsor Framework was a reminder that reconciliation and peace are not one-off events, but long journeys requiring determination, stamina and faith. And indeed, it was churches and monasteries – compelled by the living Christ – who spent years before 1998, secretly at huge risk, building the bridges that opened the way for the first ceasefires and considerations of peace.

The ultimate test of a leader, or of a nation, is that justice and righteousness are the victors in conflict, and victors in a way that opens the door to the generations-long work of reconciliation, as Christ opened the way to reconciliation with God through generation after generation.

And so we do not lose heart because the God who raised Jesus Christ from the dead is at work in our world today.

We do not lose heart but we pray and work for Ukraine and Russia, for Israel and Palestine with the recent tragedies especially, and for the other so often forgotten struggles of our world. Knowing that because of the resurrection, peace - true peace - is no aimless daydream, but a reality offered because Christ was raised from the dead.

Because of the resurrection, we know that life triumphs over death, light over darkness. We see people living the truth of the resurrection in lives of new purpose which are offered to each and all of us.

My dear brother in Christ, Pope Francis, with whom I travelled to South Sudan in February, spoke of a homeless German man found dead in the portico of St. Peter's Square. He called him 'Jesus for each of us.' And well he may be, because Jesus comes to us disguised as the poor and the needy and has always done so. Because of the resurrection we know that Jesus is alive and sees everything.

Every action we take is known to God. The silent prayers of someone's life, the unseen generosity, the self-sacrifices made, are not just actions that make the world better today. They are actions with consequences in eternity, however little known here and now, because what is committed to God does not die. Will we each answer? Will nations and societies answer the challenge of Christ's life to each of us today? For He is alive?

And conversely, all that is against God is temporary, doomed to extinction. Injustice and brutality may seem to triumph in our short lives on earth. Cruel and oppressive rulers might look as though they only get stronger, yet they will vanish. The power of the resurrection is infinitely greater than they are.

Even in our lifetimes, as we are surrounded by fears, even by evil, we know that those who oppress and subjugate others will face divine justice. And there is no question of that. We know with certainty that policies that cause suffering and pain will fall away. We can say surely "all that seeks to deny God has no future. All that shares in the risen life of Jesus is eternal."

It is true for each of us and all of us. To open our lives to Christ is a simple prayer away. To find that power of His risen life is distant only to the extent of the words "Yes Lord, I do not know you, but I will follow you." Will you pray that? Can you pray that?

Because the tomb is empty, our hearts are full. That means eternal life, eternal hope, eternal joy. It means lives that are changed today, and lives that will have value through eternity. Whether you are a homeless man in the portico of St. Peter's, or a Queen who reigned over 70 years, or a King, or just somebody going about their daily work. It means the world has hope. Because Christ is risen.

10 min read

Source URL: <https://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/news/news-and-statements/archbishop-justins-easter-sermon-canterbury-cathedral-sung-eucharist>