

1



Assurance

How to shop in your PJs

I'm not a fan of shopping. My tolerance threshold is approximately eighteen minutes. After that I'll buy literally anything if it means I can go home, which explains some of the clothes I wear. And so I approach shopping trips in the same way an SAS team approaches covert missions: identify the target; know where it is; do not deviate to the left or the right; be out of the store before the next customer has even advanced to the counter.

The solution to all this, of course, is online shopping. It is wonderful, for four reasons:

1. You don't have to go outside. No need to face crowds, queues and tempers. You can do it in your pajamas in between Scrabble moves on Facebook.
2. It means you get interesting post. Now that most personal communication is electronic, it tends to be just junk mail and bills that come through the door.

There is nothing to look forward to in the post any more.

3. By the time the package arrives you can't quite remember what you'd bought. It's like someone has sent you a surprise present. And because that 'someone' is you, there is no risk you won't like it. It is me in the past sending gifts ahead to me in the future. It's virtually time travel.
4. You get to sign for stuff. I don't know why this makes me feel significant – it just does. It's something about someone in uniform presenting me with documents needing my signature.

When you think about it, this last point is quite important. If a company or person is sending something of particular value, then it is not enough for them to know that the parcel has been sent: they also need to know it has been received, that it's all gone through and been completed.

Signing off on salvation

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is God signing off on our salvation. It is the proof that sin has been paid for. The payment has been made – we know this because Jesus said his death was going to be a ransom for sin (see Mark 10:45). But we can now know that payment of his blood has been received and accepted: we have God's signature. This is why the true symbol for the Christian faith is an *empty* cross. A crucifix speaks of death, of a payment made. But an empty cross speaks of payment received: 'He was delivered over to death for our sins and was *raised to life* for our justification' (Romans 4:25, my emphasis).

The resurrection means that we can be assured of our salvation. It confirms two things: that Jesus is who he says he

is, and that he's done all that he said he would. The Saviour is vindicated in the face of all who rejected his claims. Salvation is assured in the face of all our doubts.

The resurrection assures us of who Jesus is

We need to listen in on what the first Christians had to say. In particular, we need to listen to Peter, who had much to say about the resurrection to anyone who'd listen. We join him in Acts chapter 3. Peter has just healed a beggar, someone who had been crippled from birth and who was well known to many for his prominent begging spot at the entrance to the temple. He would have been there most days. But on this day he didn't get change, but changed. He asked Peter for alms, but received legs!

Needless to say, this healing becomes a sensation. Very quickly, large crowds gather as word spreads. Peter begins to address them. But his focus is not on what has just happened – it's on the resurrection of Jesus, to which the healing of this man points. In the course of his speech Peter gives us a quick three-pointer about Jesus: 'You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this' (Acts 3:15).

'You killed him.

God raised him.

We saw him.'

Peter says three crucial things about Jesus that make sense of the time in which his hearers found themselves, and show us exactly what the resurrection means for our salvation. He says, in effect: 'You killed him. God raised him. We saw him.' In other words: condemnation, reversal, public vindication.

'You killed him'

Peter doesn't want the crowds to focus on what *he* had done for the beggar a few moments earlier, but on what *they* had done to Jesus a few *weeks* earlier. 'You killed him,' he says. Here they were, marvelling at the healing that had just taken place. But these were the very same crowds who had bayed for Jesus' crucifixion. In these three words we have, concertina'd together, all the various forms of rejection Jesus faced in the last days and hours of his life. If we were to double-click on this statement the following four components would drop down.

CONDEMNED BY THE JEWS

In the Jewish religious court, Jesus was asked point-blank whether he was the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One. He didn't duck the question, or attempt to side-step it with some nifty footwork. It was a direct question and he gave a direct answer: 'I am.' It was unambiguous.

It also had a kick to it.

The name we give someone to call us by indicates the kind of relationship we want to have with him or her. If I meet a newcomer at my church and tell him he can call me 'Pastor' or 'Reverend', it implies I'm not intending to have a very personal relationship with him: I'm only dealing with him in my capacity as a church leader. It's all very functional. If I tell him to call me 'Mr Allberry', it's a little more personal, but there is still a measure of distance. But if I give him my first name it's all much closer. It's personal. Friendship is on the table.

One of the most precious truths for God's people in the Old Testament was that God had given them his personal name. He had disclosed himself to them personally. They were on first-name terms. It had come about when God asked Moses to lead the Israelites (you can read about this in Exodus 3).

Moses was reluctant for various reasons, one of which was not really knowing how to explain how he knew who God was. And so God gave Moses his card, if you like. The people now had a name by which they could know the God who was leading them. It came to embody the privilege they had in knowing him personally. It became so precious that they avoided speaking and writing it directly. The name? ‘The LORD’, in our Bibles; but in Hebrew ‘Yahweh’, literally, ‘I am’.

Jesus was doing more than answering the question in the affirmative. He was embodying his answer. He was claiming the divine name for himself. The court didn’t need any lengthy deliberations. The high priest spoke for them all when he condemned Jesus to death for blasphemy. And so they handed him over to the Romans.

EXECUTED BY THE ROMANS

It was the Romans who sentenced Jesus to death. Pilate may not have regarded all this as anything more than the internal squabbling of the Jewish community. But given the claim of *kingship* being attached to Jesus, it was a squabble that had at least nominally imperial implications. Stability was the order of the day, and yet here was a situation which could potentially cause huge unrest. The crowds were baying for crucifixion. And yet Pilate saw an opportunity for both resolution and political capital. A popular insurrectionist, Barabbas, would be released and Jesus would be executed. The formal charge against him was sedition – he was, after all, claiming to be a king.

ABANDONED BY GOD

But Jesus’ rejection was not only ecclesiastical and judicial. It was spiritual. In each of the Gospel accounts of the crucifixion of Jesus, the details of his physical sufferings are very sparse.

The whole lengthy and agonizing process is summed up in just three words: ‘they crucified him’. We are spared the unpleasant details of what this would have involved. We are not told how Jesus felt at each unbearable stage. But we are told what he *said*. In the thick of the darkness that engulfed the sorry episode, we hear these words being cried out, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ (Mark 15:34).

We don’t need to know the blow-by-blow account of how Jesus’ body tore itself apart. What we do need to know is given to us in those words. Jesus is forsaken by God. This takes us to the heart of his death. His suffering was not ultimately physical (hard though that is to conceive), but spiritual: separation from the Father as the Son bore the penalty of our sins. It was as though the Father turned his back on him.

BURIED BY HIS DISCIPLES

Burial is often the moment of final closure in the grieving process. A week ago I stood with a grieving family as they buried the ashes of their mother. She had actually died several months earlier and had been cremated. Up till now the family had kept the ashes at home. But they felt they hadn’t yet fully said goodbye. So they had come to bury them. I led a short service, and as each took a turn to drop a handful of soil down onto the casket, they said their final goodbyes.

The final confirmation of Jesus’ rejection is his physical burial. He is laid in the tomb of a prominent politician, Joseph of Arimathea. The body is disposed of. It’s the end of the story – a final, all-too-tangible confirmation of those words, ‘You killed him’.

‘God raised him’

Every other human story has ended at this point. When you get to the corpse being laid to rest, there’s no more story to

tell. In a biography this is where the final reflection begins, or in a movie where the closing credits start to crawl up the screen. But Peter has only reached the conclusion of his first point, and as we reach for our coats and shuffle to the exit he calls us back with another three words: ‘God raised him.’ Again, he packs a wealth of information into this short statement. Having thought about the particulars of Jesus’ rejection we can begin to make sense of what his resurrection means.

The story of his resurrection is the story of a great reversal – the ultimate reversal. The one who was so roundly condemned is raised to life. On the third day the grave is empty and Jesus is seen. The resurrection vindicates him, and as with his rejection this vindication is just as multifaceted. As we double-click on ‘God raised him’ we find it reveals and confirms his four-fold identity: the Son of God, the Christ, the Saviour and the Author of life. The resurrection shows Jesus was exactly who he claimed to be.

THE SON OF GOD

The Old Testament looked to the time when God would install his great King, one whose reign would somehow be everlasting. Psalm 2 describes something of his coronation. In the face of international opposition to him, God declares his commitment to his King with the words, ‘You are my Son’ (Psalm 2:7).

His enthronement would be public, and would confirm his status as the Son of God decisively. Yet the enthronement would not be as people imagined. Listen to what Paul says in connection to this: ‘[Jesus] . . . through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God, *by his resurrection from the dead*: Jesus Christ our Lord’ (Romans 1:4, my emphasis).

The resurrection powerfully declares Jesus to be the Son of God. What Jesus has claimed before the Jewish court – to be the ‘Son of the Blessed One’, a claim that would have seemed so laughable as his lifeless body was lifted from the cross – is now demonstrated to be incontrovertibly true. God has raised him. The ‘blasphemer’ is shown to be right all along.

The Son of God – it means he is worth listening to. He has *the* inside track on God. He is able to speak authoritatively about God. One of the features of his teaching that immediately struck wonder into his listeners was that he spoke as one who had authority (Mark 1:22), unlike the rabbis of the day. The best they could do was quote the great teachers who had gone before, showing off their mastery of the spiritual classics. Not Jesus. He preached without footnotes, as it were. His authority came from himself. He had a unique relationship to God. He was God’s man.

There are times when it is hard to live according to this man’s teachings. It might be that they rub up too painfully against our own desires and instincts, or against those of someone close to us. We might be tempted to downplay the importance of his words. Many have, after all. But an empty tomb reminds us why we need to take him seriously. His resurrection has powerfully declared Jesus to be the Son of God. It shouts his credentials at us.

THE CHRIST

Peter was the first to preach an Easter sermon. His conclusion was electrifying and, to his hearers, not a little pointed: ‘Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ’ (Acts 2:36).

It is the resurrection that supports this conclusion. Peter’s reasoning is clear and unanswerable. The Christ was to be far

greater than great King David. David himself acknowledged this in Psalm 110, to which Peter directs his listeners:

The Lord said to my Lord:
 ‘Sit at my right hand
 until I make your enemies
 a footstool for your feet.’
 (Acts 2:34–35, quoting Psalm 110:1)

The psalm refers, confusingly to our ears, to two ‘Lords’. The first refers to God himself. The second is unidentified in this psalm. All we know is that David is subject to him – ‘my Lord’. So David says in effect, ‘God said to my Lord: “Sit at my right hand . . . ”’ This ‘Lord’, to whom David is subject, is given the place of highest honour by God: to sit at his right hand. This is not some temporary arrangement. He is granted this exalted position, and in the meantime God is going to defeat all his enemies. No rejection of this King will persist. All his enemies will be humiliated before him – a footstool for him. His rule comes from God himself and will ultimately be irresistible. It has divine sanction, and will be universal and enduring. Whoever this figure is, David clearly recognizes his own subordination before him. However great David was (and to those listening to Peter, David was pretty much as good as it got) this figure is greater. He outstrips David on all criteria.

Peter’s point is therefore this: David has told us (note, *David* has told us) that there is one greater than he. David’s kingship is but a shadow of this definitive King. Yet, since David was the greatest king in Israel’s history, this expectation was still to be fulfilled. Israel was still waiting for her true Christ. And that wait is now over. One man has been raised up from death to life, from earth to heaven, exalted at the right hand of God. David’s Lord has come, and his rule is now established. The

resurrection shows Jesus to be the true Christ, the true King. The man charged with sedition is shown to be the Ruler that God himself has appointed for the whole world.

Jesus may not be popular in the public square. Actually, it was in the public square that his execution was called for. But it is that same public square over which the resurrection shows him to be sovereign.

Western society in many ways doesn't like Jesus – unless he's in a crib, and even then there's a debate. He is like cell phones and cash: not to be flashed about in public. It's fine to believe in him, but you're asking for trouble if you start displaying him where everyone can see him. Keep him to yourself. Stick him in your pocket, and don't take him out till you get home.

The resurrection does not give us that option. He left the grave, not to stand in some discreet corner, but to take his throne in heaven – a throne that is universal and everlasting. He owns and rules the public square. We mustn't keep him indoors, no matter what the neighbours think. He is God's King.

THE SAVIOUR

Those watching the crucifixion of Jesus were well aware of the irony. This man had styled himself as everybody's Saviour. Yet here he was in utter helplessness. And so the jibes came: 'He can't save himself!' What kind of Saviour is that? It was laughable. And yet there is a double irony at work here. For it transpires that he won't save himself *because* he is the Saviour. His crucifixion was to be the means by which he did save others. Had he chosen to save himself, he would have been no Saviour to anybody else.

Back to Peter's preaching – this time a little later, to the Jewish council and high priest: 'The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead – whom you had killed by hanging him

on a tree. God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Saviour that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel' (Acts 5:30–31). Jesus is described as having been hung on a tree. In Jewish thought, to be hung on a tree and to be nailed to a cross amounted to pretty much the same thing – the two are synonymous. In fact, describing Jesus as being hung on a tree gives his death extra meaning. In the Old Testament this form of execution was a sign of being under a curse from God.

The manner of his death showed that Jesus was accursed. He was paying for sin. But not his own sin: this death is the means by which forgiveness will come to God's people. Jesus is the Saviour. He became the curse sinners deserved (see 2 Corinthians 5:21). The purpose of his death is indicated by his resurrection. The curse is overturned, Jesus' life is restored. He saves because it is our curse he is bearing.

If we are in any doubt that the cross did its work, the resurrection is where we need to look. There need be no uncertainty. The payment has gone through. His sacrifice has been received and accepted. He really is our Saviour. He didn't come just to teach us and live for us, but to die for us and be raised up for us. Those outrageous claims about his death paying for sin have been proved right. God is holding him up high for everyone to see.

THE AUTHOR OF LIFE

Death is final. When we say goodbye at death we don't expect to say hello again. But not in the case of Jesus – and not in the case of those who follow him (more on that later). In his case the natural processes of death are arrested and Jesus comes through death to new life. Here is Peter, our resurrection tour guide, again: 'You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead' (Acts 3:15).

Jesus died. Billions of people have – great leaders and philosophers and teachers among them. But Jesus passed through death, and no-one else has done that. His relationship to life is unique. He is above death; it cannot hold or contain him. His resurrection shows him to be the Author of life.

I've twice moved home in the last few years, and each time into rented accommodation. It is a lengthy process – all that packing up, transportation, unloading, unpacking and gradual distributing. But all of this can only happen because one particular thing has previously been arranged and agreed upon: my receiving the keys from the landlord. Obvious as that is, if it doesn't happen, none of the rest of it is going to achieve anything. I need to know that person, to have sorted everything out with that person and, finally, to have received

the keys from that person. The whole process depends on that one part.

All life is his and he owns it. He is the Author of life. If we want to have eternal life then he is the man we need to see.

Peter is telling us that, through his resurrection, Jesus is jingling a bunch of keys before us. The keys to life. All life is his and he owns it. He is the Author of life. If we want to have eternal life then he is the man we need to

see. 'I am the resurrection and the life,' he claimed. 'He who believes in me will live, even though he dies' (John 11:25). He holds the keys to it all.

THE BOTTOM LINE

'God raised him.' This is the definitive reversal. It is so much more than another story of a local boy coming good in the end. The so-called blasphemer is in fact the Son of God. The one charged with sedition is the true Ruler. The one under

the curse of God is saving others from it. The one buried in a tomb has the power to create life.

The resurrection is an open challenge to how people see Jesus. He cannot be anything less than the Son of God, the Christ, the Saviour, and the Author of life. God has overturned the verdict of humanity on this man, and calls on us to do the same if we haven't already. The resurrection lifts Jesus conclusively out of any merely human category. It defies us to declare our allegiance to him and worship him. Jesus is vindicated.

'We saw him'

Peter's final comment indicates that the vindication of Jesus is public. None of this has happened behind closed doors. It wasn't human sleight of hand or trickery – God did this. And he did it publicly on the stage of human history. It happened, we're told repeatedly, on the third day. Jesus' resurrection was as precise a historical event as his birth or death.

It is worth pausing briefly at this point to reflect that this is the Jesus to whom Christians relate: the man who lived, died and rose again during a particular time in history. The Jesus we know is not some abstract or ahistorical figure. He is not a concept, or even just a meaningful spiritual entity. Jesus is what he is to us precisely *because* he died and rose in human history. We cannot divorce him from these events.

A key demonstration that God has exalted his King is that the risen Jesus was seen by his disciples. He appeared to his followers. We are given accounts of this in each of the four Gospels. In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul itemizes them. There were six occasions when Jesus appeared: to Peter; to the twelve disciples; to a crowd of over 500; to James; to the apostles; and finally to Paul himself. Paul is in no doubt about the

importance of these appearances: they form part of the gospel on which believers stand:

Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.
(1 Corinthians 15:1–2)

The Jesus in whom we believe died, was buried, rose again and was seen. And what the burial was to his death, the appearances were to his resurrection. The death of Jesus was physically attested by his burial, and his resurrection was physically attested by his appearances. Burial proves he died; being seen proves he rose again.

Some have claimed that these appearances were not real. Maybe the whole idea of the resurrection was triggered by mass hallucinations. Maybe it was auto-suggestion or cognitive dissonance: Jesus' followers so badly wanted him to be raised that they were unable to recognize any evidence to the contrary.

THE DISCIPLES' EXPECTATIONS

These alternative suggestions are not new. Much has been said in response to them, but it is worth noting one key historical fact which they overlook: the disciples were not expecting Jesus to rise again. Each of the Gospels makes this clear. Jesus had predicted his death and resurrection on a number of occasions and yet the disciples had not believed him. After all, on that Easter Sunday morning where were they? They weren't waiting outside the tomb, party-poppers and streamers at the ready for when Jesus emerged. They were pretty much hiding under a table somewhere back in

Jerusalem, terrified that the next knock at the door might be the authorities rounding up the last dregs of the Jesus movement to finish this thing once and for all. When the first women to see the risen Jesus told the other disciples, it was *news* to them. It was not what they had expected. They assumed it was all over. Any hopes they had for the movement Jesus had come to establish had died when he was crucified. They were going to head back home. Maybe the fishing was still good back in Galilee.

Jesus appeared to his disciples and it was a transforming experience. We cannot account for what happened next in history in any other way: they really did see him.

THE DISCIPLES' TRANSFORMATION

We're all used to before-and-after adverts, and in many cases they can lack credibility. The image 'before' someone tries the miracle weight-loss programme or anti-balding treatment is usually suspiciously smudgy, dark and grainy. You're vaguely aware that there's someone there – if only because he's conspicuously overweight or bald – but it's very hard to tell what he looks like. The 'after' picture, by contrast, is crystal-clear and bright, and we can clearly see someone in the peak of health: his body is in great shape, or he has a frankly alarming amount of hair on his head. It's very hard to believe it's really the same person in each picture.

There's no doubt with the disciples, however, just how changed they are by encountering the risen Jesus. The 'before' picture is so *clear*. We see them in the Gospel accounts being consistently slow to understand Jesus. They're not really with him and his agenda. Once the opposition begins to rise in Jerusalem they are easily intimidated and quickly abandon him.

Take Peter, for example. For all his insistence that he will never forsake Jesus, we are given a very detailed account of

what finally led him to disown Jesus. An army? Torture? It takes *a servant girl*. She recognizes him as being one of the disciples, and his Galilean accent is also a bit of a give-away. And Peter loses it, insisting even to the point of cursing that he didn't know Jesus. A servant girl. I like to think she had freckles and pigtails. Nice one, Peter.

After the resurrection it is a very different story. We see the spectacular growth of Christianity, propelled by the conviction that the crucified Nazarene is in fact the risen Lord. These same disciples display huge amounts of boldness and determination, often in the face of brutal opposition. And Peter, whose knees trembled before that servant girl, is the first to get on his feet and declare to the Jerusalem crowds that God had made this Jesus both Lord and Christ. There has been a transformation. And Peter accounts for it in those three simple but history-changing words: 'We saw him.' Jesus has been vindicated – publicly. The historical record, presented in the Gospels and in Acts, speaks for itself.

The resurrection demonstrates who Jesus is. It is not meant to be just some mega-miracle, or trump card for the existence of God. It speaks powerfully of the identity of Jesus. We can be assured that he is exactly who he claimed to be. And because of that same resurrection, we can also be assured that he achieved in his death exactly what he had said he would – we can be assured of our salvation. The resurrection compels us to see something of who Jesus is. It also compels us to see something of what he has done.

The resurrection assures us of what Jesus has done

No resurrection = no salvation

'He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification' (Romans 4:25). This is something of