

17 April 2022

Isaiah 65:17-25
Acts 10:34-43
Luke 24:1-12

My friend, you have asked me what it was like when we discovered that the Lord had risen from the dead.

What words can describe it? All these years later it is still so vivid!

At first I could not believe it. Well, how could anyone believe it?

It was the women – Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James among them. They had been to the tomb where Jesus had been laid by Joseph of Arimathea. It was early on the first day of the week: their first opportunity to prepare his body, as the sundown beginning the Sabbath rest had caught them out on the day he'd died.

They had come back all of a twitter, flustered with excitement and wonder and confusion. They told us of how, when they got to the place where they'd laid him, they found the stone rolled away from the entrance of the tomb. His body was gone; the tomb was empty. They didn't know what it meant; they didn't know what to do. I'm sure an animated discussion of the possibilities followed. But speculation was soon cut short, for, if the disappearance of the body was not wonder enough, they were then visited by angelic beings: two men, awesome in clothes that shone like lightning and hurt the eyes. The men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen!" And the angels reminded them of what he had told us in Galilee.

So this was the account given by the breathless women. But how could we believe such a thing? The words seemed like silliness.

And it was nonsense. What could have prepared them or the rest of us so that we would understand this? Just two days before we had been caught up in something that was far from fantastical, something that made perfect common sense in the grim realism of our life in those parts – a realism that is sadly common enough

everywhere. The common sense that one of our own would turn betrayer, giving over our beloved master into the hands of his enemies for a handful of silver, out of avarice or out of frustration or both: I still can't fathom it.

But, truth be told, in a way I can fathom it: because another part of the "common sense" operating at the time was that of self-preservation that led to yours-truly denying even knowing the Lord. The shame and pain of my own betrayal still burned hot within me on that first day.

Against what appeared to be a fantasy of new life was the "common sense" of a rigged, illegal, trial conducted by those with the power to turn the processes of so-called "justice" to their own ends, protecting their position in the precarious political status quo; the common sense of acts of mockery and humiliation used by the powerful to show just how powerful they are and to keep the weak in their places; the common sense of an execution conducted by the most brutal method, perfected by the Romans to be a very public spectacle of horror in order to frighten us locals into continued submission to the occupying forces. The common sense of the fact that lungs cannot operate effectively when one's body weight is supported by outstretched arms alone; the common sense of exhaustion and no air. The common sense that a dead body, placed in a sealed tomb, will remain there.

It all made no sense. But this was the report of the women.

Okay, so the women did point out that Jesus had said that this would happen, that "the Son of Man just be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified, and on the third day be raised again." But we had never really understood what that last part meant exactly, anyway.

Certainly, later, when we thought back on it, we remembered that he had talked of being killed and then, after three days, being raised from the dead. But we hadn't understood him: how could we understand? Not one of us expected anything like it. Sure, none of us were Sadducees, who hold that there is no life after death. But not one among us, hoping in the resurrection of all the faithful at the end of the present age, expected that anyone would be raised to new life after a time of death *ahead* of that great day.

It made no sense.

So I went to the tomb myself. I ran there: I had to see. I don't really know what I was hoping for. Hoping to prove them wrong: that there might be some perfectly rational explanation for what seemed completely irrational? Hoping against hope that it might be true? I don't know: but I had to find out.

I got there, out of breath, my mind reeling. The stone was rolled away from the entrance to the tomb: it was exactly as the women had reported, but it still stopped me in my tracks. I bent down and looked in: the tomb was empty, fresh, apparently completely unused. This was the tomb that had held him: but it held him no more. The only evidence that anything might have happened there was the linen strips lying by themselves. This was the linen in which he had been wrapped: but it wrapped him no more.

That much at least of the women's account was confirmed: but it still left wonderment rather than understanding.

It was not until much later in the day that I finally saw him. What joy and amazement when he came and stood among us! "Peace be with you!" he said.

And it was like the sudden greening and blossoming of flowers on the hillside after the long awaited autumn rains bring the dry season to an end.

It was like the rush of love – the rush that whooshes up from belly to throat and pricks one's eyes with unexpected tears – the rush of love one feels when meeting one's new-born for the first time, or when a little one giggles with delight.

It was like going from darkness into light! You know how it feels to be caught out on the lake-shore after dark. Pitch blackness. Feeling one's way tentatively with one's feet, trying to avoid tripping up; anxious lest the next step betray an unseen rock.

Fear prickles the back of your neck. And then suddenly the welcome light, as torches flare into flame, or as the full moon appears from behind dark clouds. All is revealed! New knowledge, new understanding!

What words can describe it? It was like having a nose stuffed up with a cold, and then inhaling the hot steam from a pan of boiling vinegar and herbs for pickling. The nostrils clear, and one can breathe again! One can smell things again! What relief! Don't laugh, friend: I'm sure you too know that feeling of relief and, well, I simply run out of images to describe the indescribable wonder of Jesus' resurrection!

And with that resurrection everything changed!

It took a while for the full impact of change to work through our consciousness. Everything needed to be re-evaluated in the light of Jesus being vindicated.

And I have to confess it took me a while to get the implications clear.

A story from some time later will illustrate the point. I was staying in Joppa at the time, and I received a vision from God. I saw heaven opened, and a large cloth being lowered to earth, filled with all kinds of animals. And a voice commanded, "Get up. Kill and eat!" I protested, of course: I knew it was wrong to eat anything impure or unclean. But the voice spoke again, saying, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean." It happened three times. And the next thing messengers arrived from a man from Caesarea, a Gentile, a centurion named Cornelius, asking me to go to his house.

Now you'll appreciate that for me, a Jew, to entertain this invitation was a challenge to my understanding of what was right. But God had given him me that vision. So I went: who was I to object?

I found there a large gathering of people, all Gentiles. And as I preached the good news of Jesus in this new situation, the Holy Spirit was poured out on those Gentiles who heard the message just as it had been on us in Jerusalem. So I went ahead and baptized them in the name of our Lord.

You see, the resurrection of Jesus forced me – and my fellow disciples – to reimagine our understanding of what our lives stood for. The fact that we were Jews was important, but not in the way we had thought.

Remember that in calling Abraham God had promised that through Abraham's descendants he would bless all the earth's families and that in choosing Israel he intended her to become a light to the nations. The tragedy is that we had forgotten our vocation, twisted our privilege into favouritism and ended up heartily despising the heathen as 'dogs'.¹

¹ Stott, pp. 90-91.

But in the dying and rising of Jesus, the true God dealt with the problem. God fulfilled the covenant promises to Abraham through that one man Jesus the Messiah, for the benefit of all, Jew and Gentile alike.

I came to realise that the victory over sin and death was not won for Jesus alone. Through the covenant faithfulness of Jesus as the representative of Israel working for the benefit of all the world, the covenant is renewed and humankind and God are reconciled. Through the death and resurrection of the one man Jesus, this resurrection life, the life of the age to come, is available to all.

What was it like when we discovered Jesus was raised from the dead? Everything had changed, even our understanding of who we were as a people, coming to recognise that God's favour extends to people of all kinds.

I have a sense that this is something that is going to be vitally important into the distant future. We descendants of Abraham were not alone in disregarding or despising anyone who could be regarded as other – as the people of God we just should have known better. But sadly I suspect that the fact that God is committed to all of humankind is something of the meaning of Jesus' resurrection that is going to have to be rediscovered in every age; God's message of reconciliation in Christ is something for all time and all people groups.

What was it like when Jesus was raised?

At last we could see the beginnings of what God had promised through the prophet: new heavens and new earth, renewed and restored creation; a putting away of the ways of the past because God had done something completely new; the end to weeping and crying, the end to untimely death, the end to the lack of proper reward for one's labour; the beginning of the age of everlasting peace.

What was it like when Jesus was raised?

When we met him again, restored to us; when we could no longer consider it a nonsense tale and started to make sense of it; when he uttered those bracing words, "Peace be with you!; ... it was as if the flowers had burst into bloom, the flowering of new creation. It was as if love had rushed up, new-born. It was as if the torch-light

flared, making all as clear as day. It was as if the blocked-up breathing passages were opened, allowing breath and new life and vigour.

What was it like when Jesus was raised? That was the time, friend, when everything changed!

Sources:

- Wright: *Twelve Months of Sundays*
- Wright, *John for Everyone*
- Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*
- Stott, *The Message of Acts*