

Easter Sunday

Acts 10:34a, 37-43

Ps 118

Col 3:1-4

John 20:1-9

One of the most common misconceptions that I run into about Christianity is that it is primarily about us being good. That's it's primarily about ethics. Whether or not Jesus was actually the Son of God or simply a wise teacher, it's claimed by many that his primary concern was about us being good people.

So you'll hear this a lot from present-day atheists and agnostics, who argue insistently that many non-Christians are in fact better people than many Christians. And the way this argument is often framed is quite telling, in that various praiseworthy non-Christians are often described as being "more Christian" than most Christians. Such people are "real" Christians—it is argued—because they're models of kindness or inclusivity or whatever trait is being idealised, with the unspoken claim being that such an ethic is the *real* essence of Christianity. After all, Jesus was "all about being welcoming", and so forth.

You also hear this a fair bit from what you might call "nominal" Christians – people who went through the process of Christian initiation at some point but who no longer practice the faith. "I'm essentially a good person," they'll say, "I don't need all that other stuff."

And to be fair, this misconception is partly due to how several prominent Christians have engaged in debates with non-believers, arguing that the denial of God inevitably leads to moral relativism or even nihilism. There may well be some truth to this argument, but such an emphasis has nonetheless contributed to this misconception I'm describing.

So, aside from the fact that I suspect most of us aren't actually as good as we like to think we are, I'm willing to concede that it's entirely possible for non-believers or lukewarm believers to be morally good people. After all, the ancient Greek and Roman thinkers who formulated the cardinal virtues were certainly not believers in the Biblical God, and many of their neo-pagan successors today do indeed exhibit fine moral qualities.

The point I am getting at is that this is actually beside the point. Christianity is not primarily about ethics, or "being a nice person," or "having a heart of gold." A particular moral code *is* an inevitable implication of the Christian revelation, but it is secondary – in and of itself, it is not the central theme of our faith.

So then, what does lie at the heart of our faith? The event we are celebrating today: the Resurrection.

The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is the be-all and the end-all of the Christian adventure. If Jesus didn't rise from the dead, my fellow priests and I should all go home and get honest jobs, and all of you should leave this place immediately. As Saint Paul put it: "If Christ has not been raised from the dead, our preaching is in vain... and we are the most pitiable of all people."

If Jesus did not rise from the dead, Christianity is a fraud and a joke. But if he *did* rise from the dead, never to die again? Let's just say this would deserve our full attention.

Some thinkers with a soft spot for Christianity have tried to deal with the strangeness of our claims about the Resurrection by recasting it as an expression of a timeless myth of death-and-rebirth, or as being symbolic of assorted psychological truths, and so forth. And there no doubt is much of psychological benefit that can be gleaned from the Christian narrative. But classical Christianity has always stubbornly insisted on the historicity of this event, to the point of staking its entire existence on it.

For instance, the earliest Christians had no hesitation in declaring that Christ had truly risen from the dead, and that the result of this was the explosive emergence of a new world. For Saint Paul, the resurrection of Jesus is the sign that the world as we know it—a world marked by death and the fear of death—is passing away, and that a new order of things is emerging. This is why he tells the Philippians that everything he once held to be of central importance he now considers as so much rubbish. The risen Christ has overturned the old world and ushered in a new creation.

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So why do we Christians hold the Resurrection to be so important, to the point of staking our entire faith on its veracity?

When Jesus was killed and his messianic claims seemingly debunked, his Apostles hid behind locked doors, fearing for their lives, and trying to figure out how it all had fallen apart. With all their dreams seemingly shattered, they may well have even begun resigning themselves to the idea that death would always have the final say, so why bother with any of it.

Physics speaks of this concept as the Law of Entropy. Everything eventually slows down, and wears down, and breaks down. Nothing lasts forever. All of our endeavours are like sandcastles on the beach, just waiting for the inevitable, unstoppable tide to wash them out to sea. As the book of Ecclesiastes puts it, all things die and decay, gravity and death are unbeaten, and everything else is vanity.

Well, fast forward a few weeks, and these very men who had consistently missed the point while Jesus was alive, and ran for cover at his death, and then hid in fear behind locked doors—these same men now took on the world with a courage that defies

description. With the exception of Saint John, each of them would eventually endure brutal deaths themselves for the sake of Christ, and do so willingly.

A number of observers have pointed to this dramatic transformation of the Apostles as one of the more convincing proofs of the Resurrection, in that their subsequent behaviour is very difficult to explain if Christ had not indeed risen from the dead, met with them, and filled their hearts with joy. Some of their contemporaries claimed that they had stolen Jesus' body and lied about him rising from the dead, but, as G. K. Chesterton once noted, "it is very difficult to imagine men being tortured and killed for the truth of a miracle which they knew to be a sham."

The reason that the risen Christ filled the Apostles with such joy and courage was because it meant that—against all expectations—that most unconquerable of foes—*death*—had finally been vanquished. Life is no longer just an inevitable decline until all things pass away into meaninglessness. Instead of the Law of Entropy putting an inevitable end to all we hold most dear, we now have the assurance that anything we do for the love of Christ *will last*, even once this world is gone.

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Jesus wasn't just resuscitated like Lazarus was. He didn't just wake up, yawn, rub his eyes, and head out for a walk. Jesus rose, never to die again. This is a new type of life—the universe has been recreated—and nothing will ever be the same again.

And there is a new quality to this new life. Notice how the risen Jesus interacts with his Apostles. As I like to say, if I was Jesus (thank God I'm not!), and my closest followers—who I'd been training up for three years—all ran for cover and denied me as I was being put to death – if the Father raised me on the third day, when I next saw those guys, I'd have made them pay! You idiots!

I mean, if anyone had the right to hold a grudge... but what does Jesus do? He doesn't even mention it. Instead, he gives Peter three chances to say "I love you" to make up for his three denials. He identifies his very *breath* with forgiveness. This is a new world. The apostles are seeing the first rays of light of a new kind of existence.

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We're told that when Saint John first entered the empty tomb, he saw the linen cloths on the ground, and *believed*. What did he believe? That Jesus is *alive*.

This is what makes us Christians. Not being kind to our neighbour, or forgiving people who've hurt us, or helping the poor. Plenty of people do these things who've never heard of Jesus. No, we are Christians because we believe that Jesus is alive. And we believe that Jesus is alive, *because we've met him* – and we are preparing to meet him again right now in this very Mass.

So yes, it is indeed possible for people of all religions and none to be “good people.” They can all be tolerant, inclusive, and have any other virtue that is valued these days. But only Christians witness to an earthquake that has shaken the foundations of the world and turned every expectation upside down. Only Christians are baptised into the new life that dawned from an empty tomb. Only Christians proclaim to a weary world that the grave has been conquered, and death no longer has the final say.

Witnessing to this breathtaking truth is our duty—and our privilege—as disciples of the crucified and risen Lord.