

Reason for Our Hope 3

by Peter Maiden

Peter Maiden emphasizes the centrality of the resurrection of Jesus Christ as the foundation of Christian faith and hope.

Duration: 56:15

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 15:1

Topics: "Hope"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the belief of Christians in the resurrection of Jesus Christ and his promised return in glory. They highlight the significance of Jesus being the same person who performed miracles and sacrificed himself on the cross. The speaker also mentions the credibility of the witnesses to Jesus' resurrection, including apostles like John, James, Peter, and Paul. They argue that the transformation of the disciples from fearful cowards to bold proclaimers of the gospel is evidence of the truth of Jesus' resurrection. The sermon concludes by encouraging believers to confidently share their faith, relying on reason and evidence, and trusting in God's surpassing understanding.

Transcript

1 Corinthians chapter 15, and we're going to read the first 20 verses of this chapter. This has been said as the third in a series of talks which I've been giving, the first two down at Sandhills Lane, where we're looking at some of the reasons for what we believe as Christians. Peter said that we should be able to give a reason for the hope that is within us.

Now on our first night together I was explaining my belief that by reason alone, by the use of the mind alone, we can never find God. To find God you must make that great step into the realm of faith. But as I was saying on Thursday evening, I believe you can go so far down the road of reason and then you have to step on from reason into faith.

You never have to step out of reason in order to become a Christian. Christianity is entirely reasonable, but it's beyond human reason. And we've been looking at some of the reasons for believing that the Bible is the Word of God.

Last night the reasons for believing that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and tonight the reasons for believing that Jesus rose from the dead. Now I do not believe that Jesus Christ rose from the dead merely because of these human reasons. I believe that Jesus rose from the dead for two basic reasons.

The first is that this book declares that that is so, and I have found this book to be entirely reliable in my life. The second reason is that I have met the risen Jesus. Not on the physical plane of course, but I have met the risen Jesus on the spiritual plane.

And once you've met with Jesus Christ, you need no further argument for yourself for the resurrection. These arguments or reasons we're going to look at tonight are to confirm our faith and also to help us in our witness as Christians. 1 Corinthians chapter 15, and we're going to read the first 20 verses.

My reading will be from the New International Version of the Bible. Now brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preach to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stem. By this gospel you are saved if you hold firmly to the word I preach to you, otherwise you have believed in vain.

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance, that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter and then to the twelve. After that he appeared to more than 500 of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also as to one abnormally born.

For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No I worked harder than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.

Whether then it was I or they, this is what we preach and this is what you believe. But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.

More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God. For we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead, but he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either.

And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile, you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men.

But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. May God add his blessing to those verses from his word. As you can see from that passage, the great hope of every Christian and the unique claim of the Christian faith is that Jesus Christ is alive today.

No other major world religion makes such a claim for its founder. Professor Childers wrote the following, Muhammad died on June the 8th 632 AD at the age of 61 at Medina, where his tomb is annually visited by thousands of devout Muhammadans. All the millions and millions of Jews, Buddhists and Muhammadans agree that their founders have never come up out of the dust of the earth in resurrection.

So this claim that Jesus Christ is alive today is unique to the Christian faith. It's also absolutely fundamental to the Christian faith. As Paul argues here in 1 Corinthians 15, if Christ is not raised, if Jesus is not alive today, our faith as Christians is futile.

We have nothing to preach about and we ourselves are still in our sins. A central fact in the first Christian sermon preached after the death of Christ, Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost was the resurrection. He said to the gathered crowd in the marketplace, you nailed Jesus to the cross.

You put him to death. But God raised him up, putting an end to the agony of death, since it was impossible for him to be held in its power. Again in 1 Corinthians 15, in verses 3 to 5, where Paul sums up in a nutshell the Christian gospel, you can see how utterly central to that gospel the resurrection is.

Paul says, this is my gospel, this is that which I've received from the Lord, verse 3. This is that which is of first importance to me. In other words, Paul is saying, if I could only say one thing to you people, this is what I'd say. I'd say Christ died for our sins.

He was buried and he was raised on the third day and it was all in accordance to the Scriptures. No one can read the book of the Acts of the Apostles, the history of the early church, without agreeing that this was the message, the message of the resurrection, which inspired and empowered those early Christian preachers. It was this profound conviction that their Messiah had defeated death and was alive forevermore.

Dr. Wilbur Smith wrote, the resurrection is what you might call one of the great fundamental doctrines and convictions of the church. It so penetrates the literature of the New Testament that if you lifted out from this book every passage in which there is a reference to the resurrection, you would have a collection of writings so mutilated that what remained could not even be understood. That's how central and fundamental the resurrection is to our faith.

Now let's be quite clear before we go any further as to what we Christians are claiming when we say that Jesus is alive today. We're not just claiming, as some so-called Christian preachers would declare, that the spirit of Jesus lives on in his followers. I was at a meeting on one occasion where a man was supposed to be preaching on the resurrection and he says, he said on that occasion, the resurrection takes place every day.

You can see the living Jesus in the trees. You can see him in all the nice flowers around you. You can see the living Jesus in all the lovely people in our world.

That's not what we're claiming. We're claiming in scientific language that the resurrection is a time-space-dimension event in history. It actually took place, physically happened within space, within this universe in history, the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Now before we consider the evidences for this view, I want to show you what Christian doctrines are dependent upon it. You'll soon see that everything depends on the resurrection. Number one, if Jesus is alive today, then Christianity is unique.

There are many philosophies, many religions in the world today. New ones are being born every day. Many people crying out for the mind of men and women, saying we have the truth.

This is the way through life. This is the way to God. Now how can we choose between these religions and philosophies? How do we know which is true and which is not true? How do we know which is unique amongst so many? Well, if Jesus Christ is alive today, then we need to look no further.

If Jesus Christ is alive today, God has put his stamp upon the Christian faith. He has put that stamp of uniqueness, that stamp of authenticity upon the Christian faith. Paul says in Romans chapter 1 and verse 5, that God has declared Jesus to be his son by the resurrection from the dead.

In other words, God has put his declaration upon Christianity through the resurrection. So if Jesus is alive today, that's the first truth we can draw. Christianity is unique.

Secondly, if Jesus Christ is alive today, and Paul is arguing this very strongly in 1 Corinthians 15, then death, the final enemy of every human being, is conquered. You see the Christian faith throughout the Bible links belief in the immortality of men with belief in the resurrection of Jesus. Jesus said, because I live, and he was speaking in eternal terms, because I live eternally, you shall live also, you shall also live eternally.

Here in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul calls Jesus the first fruit of those who will rise from the dead. When the farmer brings him the first fruit, he knows that there is a harvest soon to follow. And here is the incredible claim of the Christian.

Jesus is only the first of millions who will be raised from the dead to life everlasting. Paul was so sure of this, if we'd gone on in 1 Corinthians 15, we would have noticed his personal assurance. He was so sure that he could write the following, O death, where is your sting? O grave, where is your victory? And as preparations were being made for his own execution, he was able to write to Timothy, My time has almost run out.

Very soon I will be on my way to heaven, and in heaven a crown is waiting for me, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give to me. Now upon what is such confidence based? Upon what confidence has martyr after martyr in the history of the Christian church and still around the world today, upon what confidence have they gone to their execution singing songs of joy and gladness? They've gone on the confidence of their own eternal resurrection based on the resurrection of Jesus Christ. He's the first fruits of the Christian harvest to life everlasting.

So if Jesus is alive, Christianity is unique, death is conquered. Thirdly, there is power available to mankind to live in the 20th century. The teaching of the Bible is that this living Jesus will enter our lives by his spirit, his Holy Spirit.

He will bring into our lives as he himself comes within us, his holiness and righteousness, his love, his power, and so on. This is why we have a message to preach to 20th century men. We don't just offer to mankind hope in eternity, hope when we die.

I hope you don't preach the Christian gospel like that. That's not our only offer to mankind. Our offer to men and women is new life today, eternal life beginning now, the moment you invite the living Christ to enter your soul, bringing with him his resurrection power, his righteousness, his love, and all his virtues.

Fourthly, if Jesus Christ is alive today, then his return to this earth is certain. Often when I take a series of meetings at a university, I will preach one night on the resurrection and the next night on the second coming. People go away after the resurrection night hardly believing that I can believe in such things.

And as they walk through the door the next evening, I always say, if you found last night hard, you're going to find tonight impossible. Because we Christians not only believe that God 2,000 years ago gave life to his son who had actually died, we also go on to believe that this same God is going to send his son in

glory to receive his church to be with himself forevermore. This was the promise of the angel, wasn't it? At the time of Christ's ascension.

What beautiful words. This same Jesus, don't you love that word same? This same Jesus, the Jesus who walked around the shores of Galilee, the Jesus who gave life to the dead, hearing to the deaf, sight to the blind, who took the children and sat them upon his knee, the same Jesus who went to the cross in my place, this same Jesus will burst through the clouds, the trumpet will sound, the dead in Christ will rise first. Those of us who might be alive upon this earth at that time will go and meet them and will be with the Lord forever.

This incredible belief becomes credible once you accept that Jesus who actually died rose again and lives forevermore. The fifth doctrine which is sure, if Jesus is alive today, is the doctrine of the deity of Christ. And we touched on this very briefly last night.

If Jesus is alive, then there's absolutely no question that he is exactly whom he claimed to be, God in human flesh. No one can give life to the dead except God the creator himself. I've already quoted Romans 1 verse 5, God has declared, God has demonstrated his son by the resurrection from amongst the dead.

Jesus is proven to be the Christ if he is alive today. So much you can draw from that. If he's the Christ, then his words are true and we do not need to doubt them.

If he is the Christ and he died in our place upon the cross, then his sacrifice is sufficient to save us from our every sin. And there's the wonder of the resurrection to the Christian. The wonder of the resurrection is not only that we have power available for life today, but the wonder of the resurrection is that God demonstrates his satisfaction with the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

He demonstrates through the resurrection that he's well pleased with the cross and because of the atoning work of Christ, which includes the resurrection, we are forever free from our sins. There's no condemnation for those of us who are in Christ and it's the resurrection that confirms that point. Now all of these things depend entirely upon the resurrection.

If Jesus is alive, then these things are true. If Jesus is not alive, they are all futility. Well then, is there any evidence apart from the Bible to substantiate this incredible claim that Jesus has beaten death? The immediate reaction, quite naturally, is to dismiss it from our minds without thought as being impossible.

When you're talking to the people in the street, that will be their immediate reaction. To dismiss it from their minds, they'll say this is utterly impossible. And as I say, that's natural.

Because if Jesus is alive today, then something has happened which has broken natural laws. Natural laws which we, both through education and through experience, have come to believe are unbreakable. And admittedly, the argument for the resurrection ends there, unless we are willing to believe that God the Creator is involved in this.

If we can believe that God the Creator is involved, then we can expect something surprising. We can expect God overruling the natural laws of the universe in order to fulfil His divine purposes. And that is the claim of the Bible.

The claim of the Bible is that God has overruled natural laws, normally unbreakable, because He is the One who created these laws, and who sustains these laws, and therefore it is quite within His power to

overrule them. This is what the Old Testament prophets declared would happen, and this is what Jesus promised would happen long before He reached the city of Jerusalem. Let me read to you from Matthew's Gospel, chapter 20.

As Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, He took the twelve disciples aside, and He said to them, look, we're going now to Jerusalem. The Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests and scribes. They will condemn Him to death.

They will deliver Him to the Gentiles, to be mocked, scourged, and crucified. And on the third day, He will be raised again. That's the Lord Jesus Christ speaking to His disciples even before He entered the city where He would die, telling His disciples in considerable detail of the events which would take place when He reached that city.

Jesus used a number of illustrations to depict His death, His burial, and His resurrection. One of the most famous was the illustration of Jonah. Jesus said just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the large fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

Here's the first thing every opponent of the resurrection must face. How do we speak, or how do we explain the Old Testament prophecies of the resurrection? How do we explain the detailed knowledge which Jesus seemed to have of the events which would happen in Jerusalem long before He personally arrived in that city? Well then, let's look at the evidence. The evidence is seen under three headings.

The evidence of the empty tomb, the evidence of the eyewitnesses, and the evidence of the changed lives of the apostles and the history of the Christian church. Let's look first at the tomb which became empty. Now how do we know that it became empty? Well of course we have eyewitness accounts.

Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, the Virgin Mary, and so on. They are all, they say, witnesses to this fact. Someone of course might say that they were either deluded or they were merely presenting fabrications to us.

Much more powerful than their evidence is the fact that if that tomb had not become empty, and that obviously for all to see, it's impossible that the proclamation of the resurrection would have been accompanied by such remarkable results. Now let Dr. Pannenberg state the case for us. In Jerusalem, the place of the execution and grave of Jesus, it was proclaimed not long after his death that he had been raised.

The situation demands that within the circle of the first community, one had a reliable testimony for the fact that the grave had been found empty. The resurrection proclamation couldn't have been maintained in Jerusalem for a single day, not even for a single hour, if the emptiness of the tomb had not been established as a fact for all concerned. Now that's a simple argument, isn't it? In the early days of the Christian church, there were remarkable results through the apostles' preaching.

Three thousand souls on the day of Pentecost, and soon two groups of people were feeling extremely threatened by this growing sect, the Nazarenes, the Christians. The Jews were becoming threatened as their synagogues began to empty. The Roman government were becoming threatened.

What kind of group were these people? Were they just some mystical religious group, or would they become a political alliance? Both groups were very concerned. And it would have been a simple thing to stamp out Christianity if that tomb had not become empty. All the Roman or Jewish leaders would need to

have done would be to take the new converts to the tomb, roll back the stone and say, look, there's the body of your so-called messiah.

Now go back to your synagogues. Go back to your homes. It was a nice idea, he was a good man, it was a good theory, but there's the evidence.

He's dead. But they were not able to do that. Why? As Christians, we say because Jesus rose again.

Some however, are not able to accept that. It was the French rationalist, Macaulay who said, if Christ is risen, then he's not dead, or he was not dead. And if he died, then he's not risen.

That's the view that some people take today. There's no possibility of a resurrection. So if Christ is risen, he wasn't dead.

And if he died, he's not risen. The people who take such a view have had to work out theories for the empty tomb. How did that tomb become empty? Many theories have been worked out, I wish we had time to look at them all tonight.

Some suggest that the disciples stole the body. Others suggest that grave robbers stole the body. But the most famous theory is known as the swoon theory.

And I think we should look at it just briefly this evening. It's by far the most popular suggestion. And briefly the suggestion goes as follows.

Jesus did not really die when he was hanging upon the cross. But he went into a state of deep unconsciousness. And when he was placed in the tomb, he was revived by the cool air of the sepulcher.

Then he arose and departed. Now how do we tackle this popular theory? Well, there are a number of ways. We could, for example, show the medical evidence for the death of Jesus.

Professor Samuel Horton, the great physiologist from the University of Dublin, has written a very interesting article showing that John's record, that blood and water flowed from the side of Jesus, would have been the exact result if the left side of a person was pierced by a large knife comparable to a Roman spear. But it would only be the result, and could only be the result, if the victim had already died. Medical evidence.

But let's put that to one side for a moment. And let's accept the theory, temporally, that Jesus was still alive when he was placed in that tomb. If you accept that theory, you would still have to believe the following.

That after the rigours and pains of trial, mockery, flogging, and crucifixion, Jesus then survived for 36 hours in a stone sepulcher with neither warmth, food, nor medical care. Then he rallied sufficiently to perform the superhuman feat of shifting the boulder which secured the mouth of his tomb. Of course, he did all of that without disturbing the Roman guard which Pilate had placed there.

Then, weak, sickly, and hungry, he appears to his disciples in such a way as to give them the impression that he had vanquished death. Then he lived somewhere in hiding for 40 days, making occasional surprise appearances, and then finally disappeared without any explanation. You have to believe all of that if you're unwilling to believe in the resurrection.

My only conclusion can be that you have to be a person of greater faith than I to accept the swoon theory. It is by far easier for me at least to accept the biblical revelation of the resurrection. Now, just before we move on, there are two further points which we should note.

Professor Thorburn commenting on the enormous size of the stones used on such occasions when they closed the mouth of a tomb. In these days, says Professor Thorburn, it usually required several men to move such stones. And in fact, very recently, a second-century manuscript of the Bible has been found, one of the very earliest manuscripts for the Gospels.

This manuscript translates Mark 16, verse 4, in the following way. When Jesus was laid there, Joseph put against the tomb a stone which 20 men could not roll away. Now, whether that's a true manuscript or not is open to question, but it adds further evidence to this suggestion that the stones used on such occasions were massive stones.

And then secondly, you have to take into account the grave clothes of Christ. These, in fact, were not clothes as such, but they were a kind of bandage wrapped round and round a corpse. And then they were coated normally with about 100 pounds of spices.

And the position in which the grave clothes were found, as seen by the eyewitnesses of the empty tomb, are powerful evidence for the fact of the resurrection. The Apostle John says that when he went into the tomb, the clothes were lying. John Stott tells us that the word lying there would be better translated collapsed.

The clothes were collapsed. The head napkin was not with the linen clothes, but in a place by itself. John Stott comments, It's not hard to imagine the sight which greeted the eyes of the Apostles when they reached the tomb.

The stone slab on which the body was placed, the collapsed grave clothes, the shell of the head cloth and the gap between the two. No wonder John, in his account, says they saw and they believed. What was it that they saw? A glance at those grave clothes proved the reality and indicated the nature of the resurrection.

They had not been touched, folded or manipulated by any human being. They were just like a discarded chrysalis from which the butterfly had emerged. The evidence of the empty tomb.

The second line of evidence is the eyewitnesses. How many? Well, we're told that there were over 800 eyewitnesses. I have a friend who's a lawyer and he preaches in Anglican churches.

And you know the Anglicans are very dedicated and devout. They must be because often they have communion services at 8 o'clock on a Sunday morning. I don't know how well we'd get in our assemblies if we went for such an hour.

But they have 8 a.m. communions even on Easter Sunday. One day my friend was invited to preach at one of these Easter Sunday 8 a.m. communion services. And going into the pulpit, he looked at his congregation and I must say, unlike you tonight, they were looking exceedingly sleepy.

And he thought to himself, if I'm going to get anywhere tonight, I've got to wake this crowd up. So he thought to himself, I must commence with something startling. And being a rather brave fellow, he reached across to the flower arrangement.

And he took out a flower. Now you can understand the courage. You all know how important the flowers are in any place of worship.

Some people think the preacher is important, but we all know the flower arranger is the really important person. But he reached across and he took out a flower. And then to their utter astonishment, he proceeded to eat it.

Flower, stalk and all. Swallowed, don't any of you younger ones try this when you get home, you must choose the right flower. But he did, he ate it.

Flower, stalk and all. And he looked at his congregation and they were no longer sleepy. They were wide awake.

And he said to them, imagine that you were to leave this church at the end of this service, one by one. Now on the other side of the road, there's an old man. You go across to him and you say, Sir, our preacher ate a flower in church this morning.

The old man said, I don't believe you. I know your preacher, Mr. Greve, lawyer from Manchester, doesn't go around eating flowers. I refuse to believe you.

And then a second man went and told him exactly the same thing. And a third and a fourth and a fifth and a sixth. Then my friend looked at his congregation and said, there's about 250 of you here this morning.

Imagine you all went and you all told that same man that you had seen as eyewitnesses me eating a flower. And he still didn't believe you. He would either be extremely foolish or extremely stubborn.

And then, of course, he said, 250, that's nothing. I'm here this morning to tell you that over 500 people say to you, I have seen with my own eyes Christ alive after he was crucified. Once again, opponents of the resurrection have had to conclude that it does appear some people saw the risen Christ.

So again, they have to look for theories as to how this could be. How could it be that some said they saw the risen Jesus when people who die never rise again? How could that be? Some are really morally dishonest enough to say that these are just fabrications. These disciples, these friends of Christ, they were just telling lies.

Is that possible? Well, think of the number of witnesses, over 500 of them. Think of the character of these witnesses. They're the men and the women who have given to this world the highest ethical teaching the world has ever known.

They're men like John the Apostle. They're men like James the Apostle. They're men like Peter the Apostle.

They're men like Paul the Apostle. Great, good, and godly men who tell us, I have seen with my own eyes. I have touched with my own hands the living Christ.

Professor Norman Anderson of the University of London wrote the following. Think of the psychological absurdity of picturing a little band of defeated cowards cowering in an upper room one day and a few days later transformed into a company that no persecution could silence. And they're attempting to attribute this dramatic change to nothing more convincing than a miserable fabrication they were trying to foist upon the world.

That simply does not make sense. And honest unbelievers have agreed. And so they've turned to other explanations, and again there are many.

The favourite is the explanation of hallucinations. Of course at first sight this does seem to be a very convincing idea. Many of these people were very intimately linked with Jesus Christ.

They were his closest friends. They were his family. They had become deeply emotionally involved with him.

Could it not have been that taken from them in this dramatic way they would be prone to hallucinatory experiences? The answer is a convincing no. And for the following three reasons. Generally, only particular kinds of people have hallucinations.

The highly strong, the highly imaginative, the rather nervous person. They are prone to hallucinations. The appearances of Christ, it would seem, almost deliberately were not restricted to any one kind of person.

Jesus appeared to all kinds of people in all kinds of circumstances. He appeared to Mary Magdalene, who was afraid and astonished. A woman who may well medically have been prone to hallucinations.

He appeared to Peter, the hard, rough fisherman. He appeared to Thomas, full of unbelief, a real agnostic if ever there was one. He appeared to the disciples on the road to Emmaus as they were distracted by the events of the week.

He appeared to the disciples even as they were busily involved in fishing on the Lake of Galilee. He appeared to that articulate, brilliant, Gamalian pupil Saul of Tarsus, just outside of the city of Damascus to which he was going for the purpose of persecuting the followers of this man. He appeared to all kinds of people in all kinds of circumstances.

Secondly, hallucinations always tend to recur over a long period of time with noticeable regularity. They either occur more frequently until a point of crisis or they recur less frequently until they fade away. Professor C.S. Lewis writes the following.

All the accounts suggest that the appearances of the risen body came to an end, some describe an abrupt end, six weeks after the death. A phantom can just fade away but an objective entity must go somewhere and something must happen to it. Thirdly, there was nothing in the resurrection appearances of Jesus to even resemble a hallucination.

The risen Jesus could not only be seen, he could be heard, he could be touched, he could walk, he could show to people the marks of his suffering. He could even cook fish which people ate and which he himself ate. Hardly sounds like a hallucination.

Fabrications, hallucinations, in my opinion these things are ruled out and I have heard no other worthy explanation for this fact. I personally must conclude that all the evidence points to the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. But then the third line of evidence and probably the most powerful of all is the change in the life of the apostles and the history of the Christian church.

John Stott says that perhaps the transformation of the disciples is the greatest evidence of all for the fact of the resurrection. Have you ever thought about the Christian church? The Christian church was founded somewhere around A.D. 32. Now it didn't just happen.

It had a definite cause. It was said of the early Christians at Antioch that they turned the world upside down. What was the cause of this amazing influence? What was the cause of this dramatic energy? And I would suggest to you tonight that the cause was the resurrection.

These people saw, these people communicated with the risen Christ. But what was the change which took place in these disciples? It was completely dramatic. On the day of the crucifixion they were filled with gladness, with sadness sorry.

On the first day of the week with gladness. At the crucifixion they were hopeless. On the first day of the week their hearts glowed with certainty and with hope.

When the message of the resurrection first came to them they were incredulous, hard to be convinced. But once they saw the Christ they were so assured that they never ever doubted again. Many of them went to their deaths, the most painful possible deaths, believing fervently in the resurrection.

Consider the Apostle Peter. The historical evidence is quite firm that Peter possibly died alongside Paul just outside the city of Rome. And when his executioners came to him the second century historians tell us Peter refused to be crucified in the same way as Jesus Christ.

And he pleaded with his executioners, I am not worthy to die in the same way as my Saviour. Turn me around, crucify me upside down. Can you imagine the pain of such a death? And all that man had to do was to deny the resurrection.

The cross would have been taken down, he would have gone free if he had denied the resurrection. Are you willing to believe that people would die such dreadful deaths for something they knew was not true? The amazing change in the disciples is tremendous evidence for the resurrection. But what about the history of the Christian Church? From A.D. 32, the Christian Church has been the most opposed institution upon Earth.

All around the world, we'll see tomorrow night, it's a worldwide religion, the only truly worldwide religion in the world. All around the world people have opposed the Christian Church. Government after government has sought to stamp it out and still today that is the case.

But no one can dampen the flame which the resurrection of Jesus Christ ignited. Even Emperor Napoleon realised this towards the end of his life. As a prisoner on the lonely island of St Helena he wrote the following.

An extraordinary power of influencing and commanding men has been given to Alexander, to Charlemagne and to myself. He wasn't a very humble man. But with us, the presence has been necessary.

The eye, the voice, the hands. But this Jesus Christ he has influenced and commanded his subjects without visible bodily presence for over 1800 years. The history of the Christian Church is just that.

It's the history of an invisible presence guiding, inspiring empowering his people. The resurrected Christ. Not so long ago I had the privilege of having breakfast with one of these gentlemen who makes regular trips behind the Iron Curtain.

And I heard before meeting with him that he'd recently been into the land of Albania. If you know anything about Albania it's probably the most closed or one of the most closed countries to the Christian gospel in the world today. It's a communist government although its people are Muslim.

75% of them are Muslim but it has a communist government very much like the country of Afghanistan of course, today. A number of years ago now 20-30 years ago I suppose the communist regime decided that they were going to make Albania the communist state. The state that every other state would look up to the Russians, the Chinese and so on.

So their leaders got together it's well documented and they said how are we going to do this? How are we really going to create socialism communism in this nation? One of their first decisions was we must stamp out Christianity. Christianity represses the people we must be rid of it. So one of the most awesome persecutions of the Christian church began and the wall was built metaphorically around the country of Albania.

No one could get in not even the Russians and the Chinese what went on no one will ever really know but recently for economic reasons they've had to open the borders to tourists and some Christians are tremendously innovative they're just waiting for these countries to open up to tourists and in they go as tourists with suitcases full of Bibles and Testaments and the rest. My friend managed to get into Albania and he managed to get away from the official courier and visit some addresses which he had received my first question over breakfast was well what was it like?

How is the church in Albania? And his conclusion didn't surprise me it is stronger today than thirty years ago I was recently in East Germany at a brethren conference and I was amazed to see the life and the power of young Christians in East Germany I went out with them onto the streets of their city tracting every one of them knew that if they were caught in the act their freedom would be taken from them immediately people all around the world are realising that you cannot stamp out Christianity the more you throw at it the more swiftly and the more eagerly it grows what is your explanation if it's not the resurrection if it's not that behind and within and around this world wide body is the resurrected Christ of course the only way you can finally be convinced that Jesus is alive is to meet him the only way I can be sure that you're alive the only way you can be sure that I'm alive is a personal meeting you can be told, you can see photographs the only way you can finally know is a personal meeting almost every person in this room tonight possibly every person has met with the risen Christ for us there is no doubt for us we need no argument once you've met with this Christ you need no further words the reality is assured we are convinced that death could not keep its prayer with Jesus our Saviour we're convinced that he tore the bars of death away Jesus our Lord up from the grave he arose with this mighty triumph o'er his foes now let me remind you of just what is dependent upon this if you and I believe this tonight then we are sure of other things we are sure that our faith is unique not one faith amongst many as many in the church are seeking to say today we no longer just have the world council of churches we have the world council of faiths where Buddhists and Mohammedans and Confucianists sit with Christians on committees on equal terms what nonsense is Buddha alive today? is Mohammed alive today? you can go with millions of pilgrims and you can visit his tomb not so with Jesus or you can visit his so-called tomb but you'll find it empty we are not one amongst many our faith is unique people may say we're bigoted people may say we're not sufficiently wide and expansive in our thinking why? because of the resurrection our faith is unique secondly, we are utterly convinced of the truth of Jesus he is the son of God the resurrection proves it his words are true we are convinced that there is power available for us in life today are you enjoying that power Christian friend? the resurrection power of Jesus Christ if you read Ephesians chapter

1 when you get home particularly the last paragraph you will see Paul explaining to the Ephesians that the power available to them for living is that very power which God used in raising his son from the dead why is it that we live such beggarly weak lives?

Jesus is alive he reigns and rules within us by his spirit of course we know, and this is what I'll be preaching on at 6.30 tomorrow night we know that Jesus is coming again and we look forward with expectation the word hope is no longer sufficient it's changed its meaning since bible times we don't look forward with hope we look forward with absolute assurance in a world which is disseminating all around us we are people of assurance we are people of confidence because Jesus is alive and he's returning for his people the hymn writer put it like this no more we doubt thee glorious prince of life life is not without thee aid us in our strife make us more than conquerors through thy deathless love bring us safe through Jordan to thy home above thine be the glory risen, conquering son endless is the victory thou or death hast won as we go out of this room tonight we should go out full of confidence and assurance we should go out to argue for our gospel in this world knowing that we are not asking men to make a blind leap of faith we are asking men to think we are asking men to check the facts we are asking people to be sensible we are asking people to look at the evidence and we are asking people to believe that God is bigger than their understanding that God is bigger than their imagination and when they come to the end of their reason noticing how reasonable it is they take that great step and they meet the risen Christ never to doubt again

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