

'Why do you seek the living one among the dead?' Luke 24. 5. Bethesda Coffee Morning. 15 April 2009.

As you know, we are looking at several of the key questions posed in the Gospel narratives. And we pick up the story this week immediately following the death and burial of Jesus.

In his gospel, Luke speaks of *'the women who had come with Jesus from Galilee'*.¹ He tells us that *'on the first day of the week, very early in the morning, they came to the tomb bringing the spices which they had prepared. But they found the stone rolled away from the tomb, and when they entered they found not the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were perplexed at this, behold, two men stood by them in dazzling garments. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the earth, but the men said to them, "Why do you seek the living one among the dead? He is not here, but is risen! Remember how He spoke to you while He was still in Galilee, saying, The Son of man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again". And they remembered Jesus' words, and, returning from the tomb, reported all these things to the eleven apostles and to those with them ... But their words seemed to them as an idle tale, and they did not believe them'*.²

Our question for today is that asked by the two angels in human form of the women at the tomb, 'Why do you seek the living one among the dead?'³ Not that the visitors from the heavenly realm were looking for an answer. They were gently drawing the ladies' attention to the nonsense of searching for one who was very much alive in a place where only the dead could be found.

And, indeed, I note that, as Luke records the incident, he makes full use of that word 'found' ... 'they (the women, that is)', he says, *'found the stone* rolled away from the tomb' but *'when they entered they found not the body'*.

A little before, they – the women – had been preoccupied ... preoccupied with the problem of moving the great stone which blocked access to our Lord's burial place. They 'kept saying to one another', Mark tells us in his gospel, 'Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?'⁴ But, if they were no longer preoccupied, they were mystified – 'perplexed' is the word we read, 'While they were perplexed about this (that the stone had already been removed⁵), behold, two men stood by them in dazzling garments'. And now they are neither preoccupied nor mystified ... they are terrified – 'The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the earth', we read – sinking in terror in the early-morning shadows of the tomb before the two figures whose clothing flashed as lightning. And I don't blame them.

And it was then that one of the angels asked his question, 'Why do you seek the living one among the dead?'

The reason for the angel's mild rebuke was, as he went on to explain, that they – the women – should have known better than to come looking for Jesus in the tomb ... after all, a tomb is where you expect to find one who is dead!

'Remember', the angel said, 'how He spoke to you while He was still in Galilee, saying, "The Son of man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again"'. True, He – the Lord Jesus – *had* suffered the cruel death of crucifixion. Yes, He *had* been well and truly dead – the soldier's spear had guaranteed that! But He had foretold, on several occasions, not only His crucifixion and His death, but had always appended His promise that He would rise again – that no power of death or grave could hold Him.

'Remember', the angel said, 'how He spoke to you while He was still in Galilee' – for, as both Mark and Luke make clear, these women had themselves come down to Jerusalem from Galilee.⁶ And to that extent they were without excuse. And, if they had only understood, believed, and remembered what the Saviour had told them while in Galilee, they could have saved themselves both their journey to the tomb that early morning and the prior preparation of spices to embalm His body. You don't embalm one who is alive!

And the women had to acknowledge the heavenly messenger was right. 'They remembered His (our Lord's) words', we read. And so those who had come to honour the Lord Jesus as one dead now leave to share with others the angel's declaration, 'He is not here, but is risen!'

But when they reported everything to the apostles and those with them, the menfolk didn't believe a word they said. Dead men don't rise! They thought the women were making it all up.

Certainly men and women like these were not the sort to suffer from hallucinations. That Jesus should rise from the dead was the very last thing they expected to happen – and, for the most part, they took some persuading that He had!

Apart from which, of course, any theory that the appearances of the Risen Lord were just cases of hallucination and wishful thinking flounders on the indisputable evidence of the empty tomb. Nor is it credible that the disciples should themselves have removed His body so as to foist on an unsuspecting world a myth and deception. For, before very long, these very men and women were in hot water for proclaiming His resurrection as the God-given evidence that He was indeed exactly who He had claimed to be and that there was salvation in none other. Many of

them would suffer a fierce storm of persecution, and, in some cases, would face martyrdom. For what, pray? For a known lie? I think not!

No, the simple fact was He – the Lord Jesus – was very much alive. And the ladies who came to the tomb burdened with their spices were wasting their time. Hence our question for today, ‘Why do you seek the living one among the dead?’

Nor is the resurrection of Christ an unimportant detail of the Christian message.⁷ Far from it. In reality it is one of the two central pillars on which everything else rests. As the apostle Paul once expressed it, ‘I preached to you ... that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He has been raised on the third day according to the scriptures, and that He was seen ...’⁸ That He was buried was evidence that He had died ... that He was seen was evidence that He had been raised. And the Saviour showed Himself alive not only to solitary individuals but to companies – ranging in size up to over 500 at one time. And He did so on different days, at different times of the day, and in different localities – extending from Jerusalem to Galilee, some 70 miles to the north. On at least three occasions His disciples actually touched Him,⁹ and they ate with Him at least twice.¹⁰

This past Monday was the anniversary of the birth of Thomas Jefferson, one of the Founding Fathers of the USA. Mr. Jefferson was of Welsh descent and was born on 13 April 1743 – a little before Mrs. Mullins.

Mr. Jefferson had a kind of faith in God, but for much of his life at least did not believe in miracles – our Lord’s resurrection included. While living at the White House, he produced his own abridged version of the Gospels – which became known as ‘The Jefferson Bible’.¹¹ The closing words of ‘The Jefferson Bible’ read, ‘There laid they Jesus and rolled a great stone at the mouth of the sepulchre and departed’. And *that* is how his Bible *ends*. But, thank God, the *true* story does not end in a sepulchre!

There are indeed many famous tombs and mausoleums scattered around the world – from the Taj Mahal in India¹² – to The Mausoleum of Emperor Qin¹³ in China – to The Mosque of the Prophet Muhammad in Saudi Arabia¹⁴ – to the Pyramids of Egypt¹⁵ – to our own Westminster Abbey. And they all have one thing in common. They are all associated with those whose bodies lie buried there.

But, thank God, that, as the angel proclaimed, our Lord’s tomb was empty ... that the story of Jesus does not end in a tomb!

Listen to His own words, spoken years later to the apostle John, ‘I am ... the living one. I became dead and, behold, I am alive for evermore’.¹⁶ I close with a quote from the apostle Peter, writing to persecuted Christians of the first century, ‘Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope *through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead*’.¹⁷

Footnotes

¹ Luke 23. 55.

² Luke 24. 1-12.

³ Compare our Lord’s own question over 20 years before to another Mary (‘Mary the mother of Jesus’, Acts 1. 14, rather than ‘Mary the mother of James’, Luke 24. 9), ‘Why did you seek me?’, Luke 2. 49.

⁴ Mark 16. 3.

⁵ And that the body was nowhere to be found.

⁶ Mark 15. 40; Luke 23. 55; Luke 24. 10.

⁷ It is said that well over three hundred verses in the New Testament are concerned with Jesus’ resurrection.

⁸ 1 Cor. 15. 3-4.

⁹ Matt. 28. 9; Luke 24. 39; John 20. 27. And possibly John 20. 17.

¹⁰ Luke 24. 42; John 21. 12-13.

¹¹ This omitted any reference to the virgin birth of Jesus, to miracles attributed to Jesus, to our Lord’s deity and to the resurrection of Jesus. It left only Jesus’ moral philosophy, of which Thomas Jefferson approved. He titled his compilation, ‘The life and morals of Jesus of Nazareth Extracted Textually from the Gospels Greek, Latin, French, and English’, which was published after his death.

¹² Built by a 17th century Emperor in memory of a beloved wife.

¹³ Pronounced ‘Chin’. He unified China and ruled from 221 BC to 206 BC. The Mausoleum is famous for the 8,000 life-sized terra-cotta warriors found there.

¹⁴ As a Muslim sacred site, second in size only to The Sacred Mosque at Mecca.

¹⁵ Also the Arlington National Cemetery in Washington USA, the final resting place of many American heroes, as well as J. F. Kennedy.

¹⁶ Rev. 1. 18.

¹⁷ 1 Pet. 1. 3.