

The Sunnybrook Pulpit

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Your labour (and your life) are not in vain!

“Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” – *1 Corinthians 15 (selected verses)*



The Shroud of Turin is an ancient sheet of cloth which bears the image of a bearded, long haired man. Some people believe that it is the burial shroud of Jesus, and that the image must have been left by some astonishing burst of energy which left something like a photographic negative on the cloth that wrapped his body. Some believe that the Shroud of Turin offers physical evidence of a supernatural transformation of Jesus' body. This it is claimed, is proof of Jesus' resurrection.

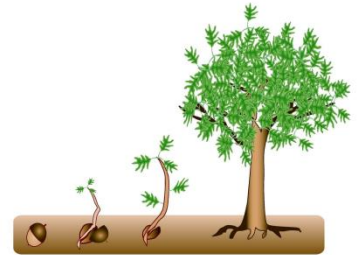
Several years ago, a film shown in Canada on Vision TV offered the startling claim that the family tomb of Jesus had been unearthed containing ten stone boxes holding human bones, several of which bore inscriptions which matched the names of Jesus and members of his family. The film claimed that this was physical evidence that Jesus was not resurrected but died a normal death and stayed dead thereafter.



The evidence for both those claims is very dubious. The Shroud of Turin has been carbon dated to more than a thousand years after Jesus' life. The Family Tomb film seems just as questionable. Pretty much every archaeologist quoted in the Family Tomb film has protested that they were misquoted and misrepresented. The film appears to have been a cynical attempt to create controversy, and cash in on the result. Neither of them come even close to proving or disproving the resurrection.

So here we have two claims, one for the resurrection, and the other against it. They could not be more different, but they could also not be more alike. They are alike because they both lead us in precisely the wrong direction, focusing our attention on what happened to Jesus' corpse.

We have only one eyewitness account of resurrection, that of the apostle Paul, and Paul says pretty clearly that speculation about what the resurrection body was like is foolish. He offers the analogy of a plant which emerges from a seed of grain: “what you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And as for what you sow, you do not sow the body that is to be, but a bare seed, like that of wheat or of some other grain.” If this physical body is the seed, then the resurrection body is like the plant that emerges from it, something greater and more beautiful than the little seed that gave it birth. These bodies are perishable, weak, and mortal. What is raised is imperishable, immortal, and incomparably more glorious than what we know here. The body that dies is physical, he says. What is raised is a spiritual body.



This teaching offers few answers to our modern questions, other than to suggest that our modern questions are the wrong questions. The right questions are not scientific or historic questions, but existential ones: questions that touch on the meaning of our existence, of what it means to be fully human. Once, on the church steps after an Easter Sunday service, a skeptical worshiper asked a great preacher if he believed in the resurrection. “Of course I believe in the resurrection,” was his reply, “I have seen it happen too many times, not to!”

The Easter story is not intended simply to give us historical information about something that happened to Jesus’ corpse nearly one thousand nine hundred and eighty odd years ago. It is intended to tell us that the powers that put Jesus to death on Good Friday, and are still powerful today, are not as powerful as we think. It is intended to tell us that the God who raised Jesus from death is still at work in our world. It is intended to tell us - but more than tell us - to invite us, to invite us to experience resurrection by ceasing to live according to the ways of death.

The powers of death, the ways of death – I know that sounds a bit spooky, but I don’t know of another way to say it – the powers that put Jesus to death on Good Friday were Pilate and Caiaphas, Roman soldiers and temple authorities, the cynicism of the elites and the apathy of the crowds, and running under it all, the anxiety that their lives might have been in vain.

Those powers are still powerful today. Those powers range from peer pressure and the fear of rejection to the co-dependency that is learned in childhood and poisons our

adult relationships. They range from the religious messages that people can be divided into categories of good and bad, faithful and infidel, to the powerful people and institutions which inflict misery in the pursuit of their own interest. And underlying them all is the anxiety that our lives may be in vain.

Good Friday acknowledges that such forces are powerful, that they resist change and are capable of inflicting enormous suffering. Easter tells us that they are not as powerful as we sometimes fear, and because the only power they have comes from the anxiety that our lives may be in vain, when we overcome that fear, we are freed from their power. Easter invites us to join Jesus in experiencing freedom from their power.

The earliest disciples did not believe the message that God had overcome the powers of death. Their unbelief was not the modern scientific doubt that a corpse can be resuscitated. Rather it was the deeper doubt born of harsh experience, the belief that you can't fight city hall, that money talks, that our past determines our future, that people from dysfunctional families are broken and can't be fixed, the belief born of harsh experience that the powers of death are powerful. And underlying it all is the fear that our lives may be in vain.

That is why Paul concludes his great chapter on the resurrection with this great exhortation: "Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain." I suspect that many of us live with a persistent existential dread that our labour *is* in vain - and not just our labour, but our lives. We worry that our lives *are* in vain.

On that first Good Friday, Jesus' life seemed to have been in vain. The powers of fear and death had done their worst. He had died a shameful death. But Friday is not the end of the story and the power of fear did not have the last word. On Good Friday, all of his work and teaching and healing seemed to have been for naught. The powers of death had decided that he was a threat and so they had snuffed him out, with little more thought than you might give to squashing a bug. But Friday is not the end of the story and the power of fear did not have the last word. On Good Friday, his disciples were scattered and dispirited, discouraged and afraid. They thought his life had been in vain, and that their lives might also have been in vain. But Friday is not the end of the story and the power of fear did not have the last word.

It is still Friday, when terrorists think that they can serve God with barbaric acts of murder. It is still Friday, when troubled people act out their sick fantasies by opening fire inside a school, or a church, or a theatre. It is still Friday, when the anxiety about whether our lives are in vain leads us to look down on others, to feel superior because of our faith, or our race, our sexual orientation, education or income. It is still Friday when we worry that a disease or a divorce or a demotion are evidence that God is against us and that our lives are in vain.

But Friday is not the end of the story and the powers of death do not have the last word. Friday is not the end of the story, because Sunday is a new beginning. Friday is not the end of the story because our labour and our lives are not in vain. Friday is not the end of the story because our lives are seed which are sown in dishonor and raised in glory. Friday is not the end of the story because there is a resurrection, a resurrection which takes the ordinary stuff of our lives, the mortal, finite, fallible, perishable, weak and inglorious stuff of this life and transforms it into something of lasting and eternal value.



The stories of the first Easter tell of how the women, overwhelmed by the powers of death, stoop and look in the tomb and find it empty, and begin to realize that Friday is not the end of the story. We too are caught between our painful experience of the power of death and our hope in the meaning of life, and so we need to be reminded regularly that Friday is not the end of the story. Every Sunday is a little Easter, and so every Sunday, we need to stoop and look in the tomb, and find it empty, and realize that every Sunday is a new beginning. The tomb, and the powers of death are real and powerful. But finding it empty, we are amazed, and in the power of that amazement lies the possibility of freedom from the powers of death, the possibility of life, the possibility that we can live with confidence that our lives are not in vain.

So, even with your questions, even with your doubt, even with your unbelief, be amazed. Be amazed at the possibility of new life, at the possibility that beyond Good Friday there is an Easter Sunday. Be amazed at that the powers of death do not have the last word. Be amazed that resurrection is possible for me and for you. Be amazed at what has happened and what continues to happen – that the power of life is at work. And let your amazement give voice to praise and to thanksgiving, and let that praise and thanksgiving lift you to new life.

