

## Introduction

# RESURRECTION

## A Reflection

### Suddenly

*As I had always known  
he would come, unannounced,  
remarkable merely for the absence  
of clamour. So truth must appear  
to the thinker; so, at a stage  
of the experiment, the answer  
must quietly emerge. I looked  
at him, not with the eye  
only, but with the whole  
of my being, overflowing with  
him as a chalice would  
with the sea. Yet was he  
no more there than before,  
his area occupied  
by the unhaloed presences.  
You could put your hand  
in him without consciousness  
of his wounds. The gamblers  
at the foot of the unnoticed  
cross went on with  
their dicing; yet the invisible  
garment for which they played*

## THIS RISEN EXISTENCE

*was no longer at stake, but worn  
by him in this risen existence.*

R. S. Thomas

### Introduction

‘Resurrection’ is one of those words that always gives me the sneaking sense that I haven’t really understood it. The feeling probably reaches back to my childhood, to the time before I realized that Jesus’ being risen from the dead and Jesus’ resurrection were, in fact, the same thing. Whenever people talked about resurrection I assumed that it was something he did in addition to rising from the dead, though I could never work out what it might be. Then one glorious day I finally realized that resurrection was not as complicated as I thought and that it referred to Jesus rising from the dead, something which – oddly enough – seemed much easier to comprehend.

Nevertheless, the older I get the more I wonder whether my childhood self was in fact right and that resurrection is indeed more complicated. Of course, it refers to Jesus rising from the dead, but what is harder to understand is what this meant and continues to mean. On the simplest of levels Jesus’ resurrection is straightforward good news – Jesus was dead; now he is alive. This simple but mind-blowing fact remains at the heart of the resurrection, but there is more to it than even that. Jesus’ resurrection points us to a new way of looking at the world, a new way of being that changes who we are and how we live in the world. This opening reflection on resurrection explores a few of the key themes and attempts to capture some of the profundity of what believing in the resurrection might mean and what difference it might make to the way in which we live day to day.

## Resurrection and new life

One of my favourite times of the year is spring. I love that feeling of the stirrings of new life that arises when first the tiniest spring flowers like snowdrops or aconites fight their way through the winter frosts, to be followed by crocuses, daffodils and apple blossom. Our local park has bank upon bank of crocuses, and when I see them the biting wind feels less cold, the rain less endless and I start looking forward to warmer times and new life. On one level nothing has changed but on another it feels as though I have been granted permission to look forward to sunnier, warmer days.

There is something in the human psyche that responds to new life. Many people will pause to coo over a baby, a puppy, a kitten, in fact anything new-born. There are many scientific explanations of why we are so drawn to 'newness' but part of it must be that it gives us a sense of hope, of life beyond the grim realities of the everyday, of a future. In some ways, the resurrection of Jesus chimes in with this response to new life. Just as spring flowers intimate that winter is passing and summer is round the corner, so also Jesus' resurrection points us to the fact that the old order is passing and new creation is just about to happen.

There is a problem, however, with the analogy between Jesus' resurrection and spring flowers that we should not overlook. Those crocuses I love so much will die before summer has even arrived and will only have new life once more the following spring. Spring flowers suggest resurrection to us but only partially. The major difference between their rising to new life and Jesus' rising is that their new life is cyclical, interwoven with death, whereas Jesus' is not. Jesus rose to new life and will never die again.

When teaching in theological college, I would regularly get into arguments with my students over how unique Jesus' resurrection was. The conversation would go something like this. I would say, 'Jesus' resurrection was entirely unique, nothing like it had ever happened before, nor afterwards.' Without fail, someone would respond, 'Ah, but what about the widow of Nain's son in Luke 7.11-17 or Lazarus in John 11.1-44?' And tension would rise in the room, since there is nothing a student enjoys more than proving their lecturer wrong. I maintained then, and still maintain now that my original statement is correct. The difference between what happened to Jesus and what happened to Lazarus is vast because just like the spring flowers Lazarus died again, and awaits another resurrection. Jesus did not die again, nor ever will; Jesus rose not to the same life – as Lazarus did – but to a different life in which death no longer features. Technically, what happened to Lazarus was not resurrection (rising to a new eternal life) but revivification (rising to a renewed old life). It is a picky point, but an important one, and begins to open up the question of the 'something more' of the resurrection. Jesus' resurrection is more than just that he was dead and now is alive, since this could be said of Lazarus and many others who were miraculously raised in the Bible. What is 'more' about Jesus' resurrection is that he will never die again.

### **Resurrection and the end times**

That is not all, however. There is even more to Jesus' resurrection than that. Although not every Jew in the first century believed in life after death, many of those who did believed in a bodily resurrection that would happen at a dramatic moment in the future when God would intervene in the world and return the kingdom to Israel. It was,

## INTRODUCTION

they believed, at this point that the dead would be raised and that a time of peace and prosperity would begin. The resurrection would herald a new world order in which Israel would be freed from her enemies and would live in peace and prosperity. To a lot of Jews living at the time of Jesus, believing that a resurrection had happened would have meant believing that the end times – when all this would happen – had already started.

No wonder, then, the earliest disciples struggled to get their heads around Jesus' resurrection. Jesus had risen from the dead but no one else had; Jesus had risen from the dead but the world was, apparently, no different from the way it had been before: the Romans still occupied Palestine, the poor were still poor, Israel still down-trodden. A lot of the New Testament writers made sense of this by seeing Jesus' resurrection as a radical and transforming event which changed the world now. For them the 'something more' of Jesus' resurrection was a belief that the end times had already started. For them, Jesus' resurrection signalled far, far more than a dead person living; it marked the start of a whole new way of being. The end times had begun, but not in their entirety; new creation sprang forth but still waited for fulfilment.

I heard one of the best ways of describing this not in a theology book but in a BBC drama, *The Second Coming*, which was televised in 2003. The play, written by Russell T. Davies, was about a character, Steven Baxter, who discovered he was the Son of God. In many ways it was disappointing and unsatisfying, but there was a brilliant scene when someone described the moment of revelation when the world recognized that Steve was the Son of God. She said that it was like a slice of one day being displaced into another: 'the event happened Thursday evening and there's a great big chunk of Tuesday in the middle.' Odd though this may sound, this is possibly

## THIS RISEN EXISTENCE

one of the best descriptions of the displacement of time that took place at Jesus' resurrection that I've ever come across. Jesus' resurrection was a slice of end times, occurring about 2,000 years ago. More importantly even than that, the event of the resurrection continues to allow us to experience a slice of end times now.

As a result, the world is as it always was with its wars, heartache, poverty and oppressions, but with glimmers of end-times perfection. In the midst of conflict and aggression, we can, from time to time, see moments of reconciliation and of compassion. Occasions when the parent of a murdered son can forgive his killers, when a community can rise against the gangs that terrorize it and make it a better place, when we can rise above the petty arguments that spoil our human relationships are, for me, all a slice of the end times now. Some are dramatic world-changing occasions; others are small and apparently insignificant. Some affect whole nations and continents; others one or two individuals. The occasions may only be momentary and we quickly move back into the harsh reality of the everyday, but their effects linger, suggesting that new creation is possible and that transformation can happen.

As so often, C. S. Lewis put his finger on this beautifully in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, where he talks about Narnia, under the spell of the White Witch, being in a state that was 'always winter and never Christmas'. For years, I thought that this was wrong – surely he meant always winter and never spring, didn't he? I now see that he was right. When the spell of the White Witch was broken by Aslan's return to Narnia, the first sign of it was Father Christmas, then the melting of snow and finally the full blossoming into spring. If we use a similar analogy, we now live in the period between the advent of Father Christmas and the full melting of the snow – spring is on its way and we see signs that it is coming,

## INTRODUCTION

but the full blossoming of the world as God yearns for it to be is a way off.

Belief in the resurrection is an act of rebellion against the evil, corruption and oppression that can so easily swamp us. Believing in the resurrection can be a refusal to accept that the world is as it is, that it can never change and that we must accept it simply as it is. Believing in the resurrection allows us to see the world with a long view, a perspective that looks backwards to the resurrection and forwards to the end times, recognizing traces of resurrection and end times in what is happening now. Believing in the resurrection can and should transform not only how we view the world, but how we live in it. We should become people in whom others can see new life, and people who introduce that new life wherever the world is stultifying and life-denying. Resurrection makes a difference not only to Jesus and the earliest disciples but also to us, as we live out our lives day by day.

### **Resurrection and life after death**

One of the problems with talking about bodily resurrection is that it can be immensely distressing for people who are bereaved. If you ask people what they believe about what will happen to them – or to their loved ones – after death, they do not say ‘bodily resurrection’. Although there is no single view about what happens after we die, most people would say that the souls of the dead are in heaven with God and that we will join them when we die. It is important to many people to feel that their loved ones are with God, safe in the heavenly realms, protected from all the harm that surrounds our human existence. Current research into first-century Jewish and New Testament understandings of resurrection seems to contradict this and to suggest that the key feature is in fact a bodily

resurrection to a renewed earth. As N. T. Wright so strikingly puts it in his book, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, this is a belief in life *after* 'life after death': we die and have a temporary existence from which we will be raised to a new bodily life.

The problem, of course, is that when someone is bereaved it is incredibly difficult – and insensitive – to suggest to them a new theological idea. Add to this the problem that the grief of bereavement lasts a long time and we can never know which sensitive spot in others, or indeed in ourselves, we will hit when we stray into the area. What then should we do? It is tempting to suggest the well-tried solution of ignoring the issue and talking about something nice and unchallenging instead. Ultimately, this is unsatisfying, however, and there is, I think, a hunger to talk more about life after death and what it means – so long as we do it well and sensitively. It often feels as though the Church only tells you what you are not allowed to believe about life after death and leaves the rest to you, only speaking again when you have got it wrong. What then can be said that is not too stretching but which does justice to the biblical idea of resurrection? There are two answers that are worthy of further exploration.

The first is that no change to the common view is necessary, we simply need to bolt resurrection on to the end of what is already held to be true. There are texts, like Daniel 12.2 for example, which seem to imply that the dead lie in the earth until the moment of resurrection; there are others, however, which speak of the souls of the dead being in heaven right now. A particularly interesting example of this is *1 Enoch* 22.1–4 (a non-biblical text, written roughly 300 years before Christ), which mentions different areas of heaven in which both the wicked and the righteous are kept until the day of judgement. They

## INTRODUCTION

stay in heaven awaiting the day of judgement and then are raised from the dead. This is not a far cry from what many people believe today; it simply weaves resurrection into what they already think.

Another answer is to reflect a little about the nature of time and to recognize that earthly time and heavenly time are not the same, as the Bible acknowledges on more than one occasion (see for example Psalm 90.4: 'For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past, or like a watch in the night'). Add to this the belief that the resurrection of Jesus has collapsed time into itself so that the end times have already begun in the present, implying that the new earth and new heaven, resurrection and judgement might have both happened *and* not happened all at the same time (but don't ask me to explain how!). Then, mind-blowing though it may seem, the dead may already have been raised on the last day while we wait for its arrival.

Ultimately, we have to acknowledge that no one knows what will happen after death. The biblical and extra-biblical (that is, Jewish and Christian texts written at a similar time or later than the Bible but not included in the Bible) attempts to understand what happens are simply that – attempts. And though there are striking elements that many people seemed to believe in (resurrection, judgement, etc.), there are striking differences as well (such as whether the souls of the dead are in heaven or sleeping in the dust of the ground before resurrection, and whether everyone will be raised or just the righteous). It is not for nothing that N. T. Wright's and Alan Segal's hefty books on the subject (see Further Reading on p. 18) are so long: an exhaustive treatment of the variety of possibilities requires a lot of space. We can say nothing with absolute certainty about life after death but we do need to carry on exploring it, in all its ambiguity, lack of clarity

and uncertainty. It is after all one of the theological ideas that many people are desperate to talk about.

## Resurrection and us

In some ways resurrection can seem remote from what we do day to day. It feels abstract and far removed from our lives; it's all very well talking about it but what difference will it make to me as I go to work, do the school run or chat with my friends? The apostle Paul's answer to this would be that it makes all the difference in the world – who you are and how you do your work or the school run or how you chat with your friends is completely different as a result of the resurrection.

In order to understand what Paul is talking about we need to think a little bit about corporate and individual identity. We live in a world that thinks, almost exclusively, in terms of individual identity. The common usages of Descartes' famous saying, which translates into English as 'I think therefore I am', puts a lot of emphasis on the pronoun – 'I think, therefore I am' – which reminds me of a brilliant joke that I heard the late, great John O'Donohue tell. Descartes was in a pub having a drink and the barman came up to him to ask him if he would like another drink. He refused. The barman pressed him and Descartes paused and then said, 'I think not' . . . at which point he disappeared. The point of the saying (and of the joke) is that individual existence is everything. If Descartes did not think, he did not exist. This idea would be almost incomprehensible for Paul and the people who lived in the first century.

Desmond Tutu, the great Archbishop and political activist, is credited with a type of theology that would make much more sense to Paul than our own individualism. This is often called 'Ubuntu theology', and draws on the

## INTRODUCTION

African understanding of interconnectedness. For Tutu, Descartes' adage needs adapting to 'I am human and therefore I belong' or 'I am because you are'. It is interesting that very young children also seem to understand this. When one of my daughters was younger, she was asked in a playgroup to draw a picture of herself. She sat very carefully drawing for much longer than the rest of her friends and finally came to show me the results of her artwork. There on the page was a carefully drawn picture of me, my husband, and both our daughters. I said to her, 'Oh that's nice, you drew us all, but you only need to draw you.' She looked back at me and said, 'But this is me . . . me and my family.' At that stage, she saw herself almost entirely in terms of her family.

Throughout the Bible we find examples of the way in which the biblical authors thought more corporately than they did individually. One prime example is in the keeping of the law. Christians often misunderstand Hebrew attitudes to the law because we think so individually. A popular assumption is that a Jew thought that doing what is required by the law would bring him or her salvation. This cannot be the case. A Jew is a Jew because they are born Jewish; they cannot become more or less Jewish by doing or not doing something. If one Jew contravenes the law, he or she is still a Jew – maybe a bad Jew – but a Jew nevertheless. The point about observance of the law is not the salvation of an individual but of the nation as a whole. If the nation as a whole keeps the law, the covenant will be intact and God will save them from their enemies. The logic of the covenant is predicated almost entirely on corporate identity. If the whole nation is faithful, then the whole nation will be saved.

It is an interesting example of how bound into individualism we are that, often, when I have explored this with a group, someone will ask what proportion of the

## THIS RISEN EXISTENCE

nation needs to keep the law for the whole nation to be deemed to be faithful. Again, the answer is that this is a very individualistic way of thinking about it. Faithfulness – or lack of it – is a whole national characteristic, not just that of an individual. How the nation behaves together, in relationship with one another and in relationship with God, is vital. A corporate way of viewing the world recognizes that how the Israelites behave as a whole is important and that attitudes and actions are infectious for good or ill. In a sense, this is what was going on when Abraham bartered with God about the survival of Sodom. The story, found in Genesis 18.23–33, features a conversation between God and Abraham about how many righteous people were needed in Sodom to ensure that God did not destroy it. Abraham began with 50 and worked down to ten; God assured him that he would not destroy Sodom if he could find ten righteous people. The fact that Sodom was then destroyed implies that there weren't even ten righteous people. The point of that is that with ten righteous people it was still possible for righteousness to infect the whole; fewer than ten would make that very difficult.

What this seems to indicate is that groups (nations, cities, work places and churches, to name but a few) can have personalities just as individuals can. For example, there are some workplaces that are much easier to work in than others because the ethos or atmosphere is positive and encouraging, whereas in other places it is very hard because the atmosphere is difficult and unhappy. I've certainly been to meetings where the atmosphere was so difficult that it was hard to get anything done at all. This is an example of corporate identity where the attitude of a group as a whole becomes more powerful than that of any of the individual members. It is possible to change group identity but, as in the Abraham story, you need a

## INTRODUCTION

committed and determined group of people to infect the whole with a different way of being.

I am not arguing that we should give up individualism and attempt to embrace corporate identity again; I'm not sure that would be either possible or desirable. What I am suggesting is that there are insights from the corporate way of viewing the world that are vital for our comprehension of some pieces of the New Testament, and resurrection is one of them. Much of Paul's understanding about Christian identity is based on Jesus' death and resurrection, and on being 'in Christ'. This is something that we will explore further in the actual studies from the Bible (particularly the Pauline chapters), but it is worth setting it out here briefly in the light of everything I have said so far.

The apostle Paul thought that Jesus' resurrection had not only transformed Jesus (from death to life) and time (bringing the end times into the present) but also us. This is a view that only really makes sense when we think corporately. In Romans 5—6, Paul talks about Adam and Christ. When he talks about Adam in these passages he has in mind corporate identity, so before Christ our corporate identity was shaped by Adam and his marred relationship with God. The predominant ethos of humanity, Paul argues, was one of disobedience and imperfect relationship with God. The only way to escape from our identity in Adam was by dying. When Jesus died, he made a way of escaping from identity in Adam, and by rising again he opened up a new identity, a Christ identity shaped, not by Adam and who he was, but by Christ and who he was. Our baptism marks that pattern of dying and rising with Christ which allows us a new corporate identity now infected, not with Adam's imperfections, but with Christ's perfections. If we are 'in Christ' then we have a new identity, a Christ identity, which involves viewing the world

## THIS RISEN EXISTENCE

as Christ did and acting in the world like Christ. In Paul's view we cannot be 'in Christ' and still be the same people we were before. Everything about who we are, what we think and what we do is now infected with Christ and, as a result, our lives should be entirely transformed.

Thus, the way in which we do the school run, go to work, chat with our friends and so on will be infected with 'Christ-likeness', marked by love, by lack of concern about status, by putting others before ourselves, by breathing new life into situations of despair and so on. Being 'in Christ' affects every aspect of our lives – even the most mundane of tasks. In recent years the popular acronym WWJD, or 'What would Jesus do?' has come close to this kind of ethic, though not entirely. WWJD requires us to imitate Jesus (which is a great start). Living resurrection lives, however, requires us to go a step further. We are called to imitate Jesus but we are called even more to be transformed by him, to find our old self transformed into a new Christ-like self.

The problem, of course, is the impossibility of this calling. We so often fail in our vocation to be Christ-like. This is where we return to the notion of 'glimmers of end times' now. We cannot hope ever to become perfect Christ-like people overnight. Even a whole lifetime of the faithful living out our lives in Christ will leave us with a pale imitation of what our lives could be. This is not something that should make us feel bad but reassured. Jesus' resurrection opens up possibility. Whenever and wherever moments of generosity, selflessness and humility occur, where there could have been only greed, selfishness and pride, we are called to notice such moments and celebrate them, and when they do not occur to strive to bring them about.

## **Resurrection, ascension and Pentecost**

Resurrection is not complete, however, without the ascension and Pentecost. The death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus and the sending of the Holy Spirit all come together as a seamless whole. The progression is simple but vital. Jesus' death and resurrection transform us and allow us to become the people that God wants us to be, but the ascension and Pentecost are equally important. Ascension is one of those sadly overlooked feasts of the Church. Often we are not too sure how to celebrate it. If we ignore it, however, we lose a vital link in the chain that runs from Good Friday to Pentecost Sunday. The resurrection offers us transformation in Christ, the ascension gives us the motivation to act and Pentecost the ability to do it.

Many human beings are, in all honesty, fundamentally lazy. If someone is doing something already, most people will leave it to them. The reason why the ascension was vital was that if the risen Christ had not ascended into heaven and was still on earth proclaiming the good news, healing the sick and befriending the poor and oppressed, then most of us would leave this work to him. We would become passive recipients of his ministry rather than active proclaimers of his message. After the resurrection, once they had grasped what had happened to Jesus, the disciples were in danger of slipping back into their previous form of existence. What they most needed was a vacuum, and this is what the ascension provided, a space that could only be filled if they picked up the challenge and took it on.

The resurrection and ascension, however, were of no use without Pentecost, because no matter how great the void left by Jesus at the ascension, the disciples were unable to act on their own. The sending of the Spirit gave them the ability to do what otherwise they were incapable

of doing. Filled with the Spirit they were able to comprehend the significance of the resurrection and to understand that Jesus' ascension and command to proclaim the gospel sent them out into the world but, most important of all, the Spirit gave them the ability to do as Jesus commanded. Beyond their human limitations, fears and anxieties, the Spirit-filled disciples were at last able to do all that Jesus asked.

This four-link chain then – death, resurrection, ascension and sending of the Spirit – is the underpinning of our Christian existence. What difference does it make to our lives today? The answer, it seems to me, is every possible difference. A life lived in the acknowledgement of resurrection, ascension and Pentecost is one that cannot remain unchanged. We are called to see the world with new eyes, to live our lives transformed in Christ and inspired by the Spirit.

### **Living the resurrection**

Some people understand 'living the resurrection' to mean that we should be constantly (and, in my view, irritatingly) cheerful, whatever the ups and downs of life. This is far from the experience of the New Testament writers, who spoke often of real sufferings as a result of their life in Christ. What it really means is that we enter the hard times with our feet firmly planted on the rock, our souls anchored in the hope that Christ brings. This does not mean a lack of suffering or even that we do not feel suffering as much as others. It is one of many paradoxes within the Christian tradition, which states that alongside utter desolation lies glory, alongside agony, resurrection. It does not lessen the pain but it can help us to trudge on. It is a truth that sometimes we may cling to with the very tips of our fingers, and in really bad times that we

## INTRODUCTION

lose touch of altogether, but it remains there waiting for us when we are able to embrace it once more. To believe in resurrection is to believe that death is not all powerful, that beyond despair there is hope or, as Paul puts it, that whatever life throws at us 'neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Romans 8.38-9).

This does not mean, however, that we will always feel this truth deep down. Faith is at least partially about keeping going despite what we feel today, tomorrow or the day after. Living the resurrection life includes expecting the sudden, powerful presence of the risen Jesus in the midst of our uncertainty and loss but trudging on whether we feel this presence or not. One of the most powerful witnesses to this has been the discovery, since her death, that Mother Teresa, to whom many people have looked over the years for inspiration in their own Christian journeys, did not, for much of her life, feel the presence of Jesus, and yet she kept going. Living the resurrection life does not imply we feel the resurrection life in us all the time but that we cling to it whatever life throws at us and seek to live out the principles of life beyond death, hope beyond despair and joy beyond sorrow in our everyday lives.

R. S. Thomas's poem 'Suddenly' (cited in full at the start of this chapter) encapsulates for me much of our relationship with the risen Christ. His expected, though always unexpected, presence appears silently and without fanfare, and then is gone almost before we have noticed it, suffusing our senses with the enormity of his being. One of the most tantalizing phrases of the whole poem comes at the end, when Thomas reflects that the robe for which the gamblers play is already worn by Jesus 'in this risen

existence'. Which risen existence? His or ours? Of course, the answer, in the logic of the poem, is his but there is the merest hint that his risen existence somehow also becomes our own. The apostle Paul certainly thought so. This risen existence made possible through Christ's resurrection is now our own risen existence. At the start of this chapter I recalled how, as a child, I always felt there was more to resurrection than that Jesus is risen from the dead. I now know what that something more was and is. It is that it is not just Jesus who lives a risen existence but that I do too; as R. S. Thomas puts it, 'the whole of my being, overflowing with him as a chalice would with the sea'.

### For further reading

Martha Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven in Jewish and Christian Apocalypses*, Oxford University Press, 1993.

Alan F. Segal, *Life After Death: A History of the Afterlife in Western Religion*, Doubleday Books, 2004.

Desmond Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness*, Rider and Co., 1999.

Geza Vermes, *The Resurrection*, Penguin Books, 2008.

Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel*, 2nd edn, Darton, Longman & Todd, 2002.

J. Edward Wright, *The Early History of Heaven*, Oxford University Press, 2002.

N. T. Wright, *Resurrection*, DVD, IVP Connect, 2006.

N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, SPCK, 2003.