

EASTER 2017

The Ancient World and particularly the Middle East around the time of Jesus was a very religious place with many new religions emerging, each with its own stories and myths. In his novel *Helena* the great 20th Century novelist and Catholic convert Evelyn Waugh has his heroine Helena, the Emperor Constantine's mother, ask the same question of all the different religious teachers: "When and where did these things happen?" she asks. Only the Christians were able to give her a satisfactory answer. I want to pose the same question tonight: When and where did the central event of our Christian faith, the resurrection of Jesus Christ occur? When and where did Jesus rise from the dead?

The 'where' is simple. Jesus rose from a cave-like tomb with a large stone covering the opening just outside the city of Jerusalem. We are quite confident today that we know the exact spot, the actual patch of earth, where it occurred. Many have visited and still visit the site today. Beginning with Mary of Magdala and the other Mary, and the Apostles Peter and John who were the first to visit the empty tomb on the morning of the resurrection, for twenty centuries now millions of people, some of them believers and some of them sceptics, have gone to see the empty tomb for themselves. I am blessed to count myself amongst them.

Interestingly, just a couple of months ago archaeologists completed major works at the site and believe they have uncovered beneath a marble slab the actual ledge of rock on which the dead body of Jesus was laid on Good Friday and from where he rose from the dead on Easter Sunday.

God's choice of Jerusalem as the city of the resurrection is very significant. Not only was it the religious, cultural, and political centre for the Jews, the people first chosen by God to be the bearers of his name on Earth, it was also what we might call 'the crossroads of humanity'. From Jerusalem the first witnesses of Jesus' resurrection quickly spread this Good News and carried his Gospel west to Rome and beyond in Europe, east to India and beyond in Asia, and south to Egypt and beyond in Africa. The peoples of the America's and Oceania would have to wait some centuries for news of the resurrection to reach them once advances in shipping enabled Christians bearing the name of Jesus to sail across the great oceans.

How much gratitude we owe to the many generations of faithful Christians in every continent on Earth who have endured trials and hardships, and even persecution and martyrdom, because they wanted to share and pass on the Good News of Jesus' death and resurrection; because they wanted *us* to know the extent of God's love who lay down his life for us on the cross and because they wanted *us* to be filled with the joy and hope of believing in and placing our lives in the hands of the risen Lord who has conquered our enemies of Satan and death.

As we reflect on the faith of the Christians who passed on the faith to us we pray that the risen Lord will fill us with that same fortitude since we now live in a country where being a Christian is beginning to demand real endurance and courage. Just a few weeks ago the boards of two Christian organisations in Australia applied for and were granted permission to not make public the names of their board-members in order to protect them from persecution. Indeed, passing on our faith in the risen Jesus and living and professing our Christian faith publicly is beginning to require heroic conviction.

In many places around the world Christians already require this grace. According to *Open Doors*, a charity working with oppressed Christians, every month 322 Christians are killed for their faith. That's nearly 4,000 a year, and some organisations estimate the number as much greater. *Open Doors* estimates that each month 214 church properties are destroyed and 722 acts of violence are perpetrated against Christians.

As recently as Palm Sunday two bombings in Egyptian churches killed 44 people. Between half and two thirds of Iraq's Christians have been killed or have fled the country and there are a million Christian Syrian refugees. And I must also mention Nigeria, the homeland of some of our priests, where Christians are being targeted and killed by Boko Haram. We must not let Easter pass without sparing a thought and seriously praying for our Christian brothers and sisters around the world who are being killed for their faith while most of the Western World remains silent and turns his head away.

What about the second part of our question? *When* did Jesus rise from the dead? Our Gospels tell us that Jesus rose from the dead very early in the morning whilst it was still dark at dawn on Sunday, the first day of the week immediately following the Jewish Sabbath. It was the third day since his death on the cross. Jesus had consistently said that he would rise on the third day, even though his disciples didn't understand what he meant, and we still profess in our creed those words we know so well: "on the third day he rose again".

This "third day" is very significant. The Ancient Near Easterners believed that on the third day a dead body begins corrupting and so a person is then dead beyond recall. Just in case there be any doubt that the beaten, bruised, scourged, and pierced body of Jesus taken down from the cross and laid in his mother's arms was truly dead, by the third day there can definitely be no doubt that Jesus' rising is a true resurrection, a real act of God, a true mystery. Yet Psalm 61 had said "God would not let his beloved know decay", so Jesus rises at the crack of dawn on the third day before any decay can touch his adorable divine and human body.

It's significant that Jesus rose on the Sunday, not Saturday the Jewish holy Sabbath day of rest. We note however that in the Book of Genesis Sunday, the first day of the week, was the first day of creation. That Jesus rose on that day, just as the sun was rising suggests that Jesus' resurrection is the dawn of a new creation, the dawn of a new way of being.

Whilst being a true resurrection in the flesh, Jesus' resurrection is much more than him simply 'getting his body back'. By rising from the dead Jesus' life is not just extended, it has become eternal, never to die again. And now that Jesus has gone before us into this new mode of human existence, he beckons us to follow him which we do when we are reborn in the waters of baptism. Yes, our bodies will die but through baptism we contain within us the pledge of our own future resurrection in Christ.

So, Jesus Christ rose from the dead outside Jerusalem on the Sunday following the Jewish feast of Passover when Tiberius was Roman Emperor, when Pontius Pilate was Governor of Judea, when King Herod Antipas was Tetrarch of Galilee, and when Caiaphas was High Priest in Jerusalem. This places

the resurrection sometime between late March and mid-April between the years 30 to 36 AD with the most likely dates being Sunday 5th April 33 AD or perhaps Sunday 9th April 30 AD.

We may not know for sure the precise date for our foundational event as Christians but these historical facts separate Jesus from the mythical pagan deities who supposedly lived in places or times that no one could specify. Our dates may not be exact but they are a far cry from the wishful thinking of "once upon a time in a land far, far away."

So we know when and where the resurrection occurred, but we should also ask when and where *does* the resurrection occur. Ultimately for the Christian, believing in the resurrection is not mere intellectual assent to an improbable but real event in the annals of history. No, for the Christian the resurrection is a present reality. For the baptised person, belief in the resurrection entails an encounter with the risen Jesus in one's own heart and soul, it entails the death of the old sinful self and rebirth to new and eternal life.