

**Sunday, 27 March 2016**

**Easter- what does it mean? and did it happen?**

Today I want to look at two questions.

1. What does the death and resurrection of Jesus mean?
2. And did the death and resurrection of Jesus actually happen?

‘Atonement’ has been the word used to describe what happened on the cross. The word “atonement” means to bring two things into unity- “At-one-ment”. We are told that what happened on the cross brought what was divided (God and humanity), into unity.

There are a variety of ways to understand the Atonement. I also want to start by reminding you of what C. S. Lewis has said about the atonement- That understanding how it works is less important than understanding that it works. He says it is like nutrition. People were eating food and drinking long before there were any theories of how the body broke down food to nourish cells. When you are hungry it is enough to eat, and it works. Jesus’ work on the cross is like this. We don’t have to dedicate ourselves to one particular theory about how this works. What we are assured of in Scripture and by the experience of the Church is that it does work.

That being said, the many ways of understanding the Atonement fall into three basic categories that answer the question “where was the work of Christ on the cross directed?” Was it directed to human beings? Was it directed to God? Or was it directed to

Evil?

First, we'll consider the view that Jesus' actions on the cross were directed towards humanity. Throughout the Bible Sin is described as a kind of sickness. In the Old Testament we read that over and over again the people wander off the path set for them. As they walk away from the safety of God's path they encounter all kinds of suffering and corruption. The work of Jesus on the cross resulted in healing humanity, providing an example for them to follow, and expressing God's amazing and unending love that draws alienated humanity back to Himself. The actions of Christ heals the relationship between human beings and God, by healing the sin that separates us. The lifeblood of the God-Man has been offered to heal our sin sick souls. And the cross is a beacon of love- showing us the profound lengths God is willing to go in order to show His love for us, and by the power of his resurrection, He empowers us to imitate his never ending and inexhaustible love. By drawing us to himself, the great Physician, we are drawn into a relationship of ongoing healing.

The second view of the atonement is the cross as directed towards God. Viewed this way the actions of Jesus can be seen as the actions of a representative or a substitute for humanity that stands before a profoundly mysterious and holy God that is unable to have the corruption of sin in His presence. We see this view in the Old Testament sacrifices. Jesus pays a debt we owe God, or receives a punishment we deserve as a part of offending a very holy justice. This is the basic idea: Humanity's sin is basically the failure to give God what He deserves. It is the responsibility of humanity to give God what is owed Him, as

well as the necessary back payment for what we have robbed him of. As a good judge, God's justice demands this restoration. For God to overlook this would make God a bad judge- to be without a sense of justice. The problem is that humanity is unable to repay this debt. Even if we stopped sinning entirely we would only be giving God what we owe Him already. The debt could not be paid down. And we continue to sin continuing to build a greater debt to God each time we deny God what we owe Him, which is our complete and utter love and service. God is left with two options- punish humanity as they deserve, or accept payment on their behalf. The tricky bit is that only a human being can make the payment because it is humanity that owes the debt. No human is able to make this kind of payment on behalf of humanity. The solution is found in Jesus Christ, who is both God and human. As a human being he belongs to humanity who needs to make payment. As God, he has resources to make the payment.

This one can be a bit hard for us to stomach because the idea of the bloody sacrifice of a life is very strange to us, but I want to also remind us that it is most likely because of the influence of Christianity that we feel this way. Throughout most of human history sacrifice has been a regular part of human life in cultures all over the world. The teaching of Christianity was that Christ was the last sacrifice needed and so in Christianity sacrifice stopped. That gives us the privilege to feel strange about sacrifice.

The third way to view the atonement is as directed towards the Evil powers. In this view the work of Christ on the cross is about going to battle on our behalf to destroy the powers of Evil and

rescue humanity that has been captured and oppressed. This is the view of the atonement that dominated the church for the first 1000 years. Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus God defeated the devil and the power that enslave humanity. Jesus goes to battle on our behalf. He confronts the supernatural invisible evils- the Devil, demons, and evil spirits. He confronts the evil powers of this world that manifest in the form of corrupt social structures and economic systems that take advantage of people and create injustice and cruelty, and marginalize people to outskirts of society saying there is no place for them. And Jesus also confronts the Power of Sin that enslaves us and makes us something like addicts, slowly taking away our free will that allows us to choose to do good, or to even want to choose good. The ministry of Jesus is about releasing us from these powers. From the unseen demonic powers, from the systemic evil of cultures that oppresses people, and from the power of Sin that lives within us. [world, the flesh, devil]

In this view of the atonement, what we see in the gospels is Jesus rescuing people from the kingdom of darkness and bringing them into the kingdom of God. Jesus saves us from the power of Evil, and the inevitable destruction that is coming to the kingdom of darkness and sin. Being freed from that evil empire we are freed from the inability to live in right relationship with God, and we become free to participate in all the joy and abundance that comes with life in the eternal kingdom of God.

We, by our sin, have placed ourselves under the power of Evil, which means a life subject to sin, fear, and death. But, God will not leave us enslaved to Evil and comes to us as Jesus. Jesus

offers himself to these powers in exchange for humanity. [Aslan- Edmund] They think they can destroy him. But the power of the sinless and divine Christ bursts from the clutches of evil and death. His humanity was the tempting bait that drew the evil power to destroy him, but his holy divinity and his self-sacrificial love was the hook that snagged the devil and defeated him. The devil's plan backfired. When Christ snuck behind enemy lines he rescued humanity from the clutches of death. Having entered the kingdom of God we have a new power working in us calling us to act out of the kind of self-sacrificial love we see in Christ. In this way God's army expands and transforms the world with the power of His love.

All of these are scriptural. To some degree we are probably trying to understand something that is deeper than our minds can handle. But of course all of this is just fairy tales if Jesus wasn't who he said he was and wasn't actually bodily resurrected. And that brings me to the second question I wanted to deal with. We have been looking at the question, "What does the death and resurrection of Jesus mean", but now I want us to look at the question "Did the death and resurrection happen?"

Believing is hard- especially when we are talking about a miracle like the resurrection of Jesus. We want to see it in order to believe it. We are able to doubt anything. Our powers of doubt know no bounds. ... Maybe this is all just a dream- like in The Matrix. If we take it to the extreme, everyday reality itself is doubtable. A life filled with this kind of doubt is a hard life to live. The bridge could collapse. The elevator might get stuck. Your spouse might be cheating on you.

It is hard for us to believe the resurrection because we have a materialist worldview that refuses to believe in anything unless it can be repeatedly tested, videotaped, and dissected.

[materialist- not obsessed with money- but what you see is what you get] We want to be able to put it in a test tube. If we can probe an issue in these ways, then we might believe it. I know people who don't believe in the resurrection simply because they have decided that miracles just don't happen.

But history isn't really something you can put in a test tube. History is primarily about trusting the words of those we never knew. There are some principles to follow to figure out if something is believable or not. There are ways history decides it can trust something someone wrote. We are being asked to believe the witness of the original disciples. We live in a world where we don't really even trust each other. People hallucinate. People lie. People make mistakes. But this is a question for history in general. How can we trust what someone has said or written about past events and people? How do we know about Napoleon, or Nero, or Henry the 8th? It can be tricky to think our way through all this.

As Christians we don't want to be naïve. God has told us to love him with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind. We are not to believe everything that comes our way. However, we are not to outright reject everything either- that is just cynicism. We are to be discerning. We are to be like sharp swords carefully and skillfully separating truth from falsehood.

We can know London is a city in England by actually going there, but we can also choose to believe those who have gone to

London and have come back to tell us about it. ... We are asked to trust the words of those who experienced the risen Jesus Christ. Do we trust their story?

Is their story believable? We don't have a lot of time, but I want to suggest that there are good reasons to believe their story.

There are 4 facts that historians agree on. First, Jesus was truly dead- he was killed by the hands of the Romans, who were very good at killing. Second, His tomb was found to be empty- some disagree about how it got that way, but it is a fact that the body of Jesus was gone. Third, numerous people reported seeing the resurrected Jesus. Followers and even enemies- individuals and groups, reported seeing him. About 20 years after Jesus' death, Paul writes to the Corinthians (1 Cor 15) "[Jesus] appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters 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." The early disciples believed that they had experienced the risen Jesus in a very physical way and they became willing to die for their belief that Jesus was bodily resurrected from the dead. ... Many of them did die for their belief. Fourth, The early Jesus followers were strengthened. They went from a group of scared disciples huddled behind locked doors to proclaiming Jesus in the temple and across the known world. This just didn't happen with these kinds of groups when their leader was killed. Usually they scattered and the movement died. ... I believe, the best explanation for all these facts coexisting is the actual bodily resurrection of Jesus (unless of course you are just going to decide miracles don't happen).

Most of you don't need these kinds of facts to know he has been raised. You probably don't believe because of the historical case for the resurrection. Most of you haven't become Christians because it makes sense to your intellect. You believe the stories because you feel you have encountered Christ. You have encountered Jesus through the stories. You have felt his presence. You have felt his peace and his love. You have felt his forgiveness. You have experienced his transformation.

We don't always have all the proof we want. We cannot reach out and touch God with our microscopes and telescopes. We can't measure God with a thermometer. Doubt, for most of us will just be a part of what it means to be human. ... This does not leave us hopeless. We are invited to trust the stories of those who did encounter him, and open ourselves to encountering him now. Amen.



## What does Easter mean? Atonement- At-one-ment

1. Directed to humanity- healing sin, drawing us with love, giving us an example to imitate
2. Directed to God- Paying a debt we owe, or a punishment we deserve
3. Directed to evil- Defeating the “world”, the flesh, and the Devil- Rescuing us from the kingdom of darkness and bringing us to the kingdom of God

## Is the resurrection believable?

1. Jesus really died
2. His tomb was found empty
3. Numerous people reported experiencing a resurrected Jesus (1 Cor 15)
4. Jesus’ followers became bold and were strengthened