

## EASTER APPEARANCES

The central Christian affirmation is this: Jesus is alive.

He was certainly executed.

He was certainly dead.

But shortly after that event the disciples claim to have encountered Jesus.

What exactly have they encountered?

Is it the resurrection of a corpse?

Is it a physical (but different) body?

Is it a vision?

What's with all the different appearances?

You would expect it would be a pretty hard task for any group of people to try to describe to the world that someone is now alive who was previously dead, but even the various experiences and descriptions are different.

In one incident the risen Jesus appears before the disciples even though they are in a locked room. Walking through walls doesn't sound like a physical body to me.

Yet a few moments later he eats some fish in front of his friends to prove that he isn't a vision. (Luke 24:36-43)

Sometimes he appears to be instantly recognisable whilst other times he is only recognised after a long time (Luke 24:31) or he's thought of as the cemetery gardener. (John 20:15)

And Paul talks about Jesus appearing to him. (Acts 9:3)

Yet what Paul saw was a blinding light – not a body at all.

Despite all this confusion something is clear.

The disciples can't properly explain it or describe it – but they know this for sure - that Jesus is alive.

It's gonna have to be mighty strong evidence to convince **anyone** to start saying this.

But in the end they are **all** saying it and all banking their lives that this is true.

Ever had an experience of God?

Ever tried to explain it?

Doesn't tend to make much sense to anyone else – but **you** know its true.

I haven't had lots of vivid experiences of God but I had one some years back when I was living in Elderslie, which I've mentioned before.

It came along in dramatic fashion at one of the worst points of my life. My marriage had just broken up, my children were with their mum, and I was at a very low ebb.

Then one day I got a phone call that pushed me over the edge.

I was in total despair, at the end of my rope, and I turned to God in a rage.

I remember letting rip at God slamming the doors, and shouting abuse to God at the top of my voice.

I remember eventually throwing myself down onto my bed and crying.

And then, I became aware that God was with me.

And then God spoke - just to let me know that God was there and understood what I was going through.

So let me just interrogate myself on what I have just said.

How do you know it was God?

*I just know.*

What actually happened?

*I just had a sense that God was there with me.*

*And then God spoke to me.*

What did God say?

*God said, "I know, I know."*

What does that mean?

*It means that I was going through an awful time, and God wasn't even fixing it but just assuring me that God knew what I was going through and would be with me through everything. God wanted me to take heart.*

You took all this from I know I know?

Yes.

So if God spoke to you what kind of voice did you hear? What was God's voice sounding like? Young? Old? Male? female?

*I didn't hear a voice.*

Ah! So you didn't hear a voice. Well how could God say I know I know?

*Somehow God said that to me without me hearing words...*

Now this is getting a bit confusing, and I'm not explaining it very well.

I'll stop the interrogation now and say this.

I can't explain this to you properly. It does sound a bit crazy.

But I know that God spoke to me that night and no one can ever change my mind on that. God drew near to me and even though I can't explain it all it was as real as the fact that I am standing here now.

That's the thing about these kind of experiences. They may seem unusual to say the least – they may be hard to explain, but once you get one you know it is real and nothing is going to take that away.

That sense of wonder or awe,  
that sense that there is something more,  
that sense of connection to everything,

that sense of music in the air  
or what Mike Scott of The Waterboys sings about in his song The Big Music:

*"I have heard the Big Music and I will never be the same.  
Something so pure just called my name"*

That sense of the spiritual, or of the presence of God.

Once you have it, people can mock you or disbelieve you, but you know you are in touch with something deep, something real.  
Nothing can take it away or deny the experience.  
You've been changed.

Clarence Jordan was an African American pastor, involved in the civil rights movement and an influence on a great many people. He came away with many memorable quotes. Once he said this about Easter....

*"The proof that God raised Jesus from the dead is not the **empty** tomb, but the **full** hearts of his transformed disciples.  
The crowning evidence that he lives is not a **vacant** grave, but a **spirit-filled** fellowship.  
Not a **rolled-away** stone, but a **carried-away** church."*

Thinking about those words just two weeks ago another minister called Carl Gregg said this:

*"What I take away from this quote is that we should worry less what people say they believe happened 2,000 years ago and more whether we are living as if resurrection still happens.  
The question is, **"How are we partnering with God today in transforming despair into hope, apathy into compassion, hate into love, and death into new life?"***

(Greg Gregg/Patheos:Practice Resurrection, March 2015)

Both of these guys are right.

The real proof of Easter back then was the changed lives of the disciples.  
And it's still true today.

The heart of Easter is not a historical fact (even though it **is** historical).  
The heart of Easter is our experience of God and how we are changed.

It was the change in the disciples that was the most convincing thing for people around them.

The thing that brought people into the Christian community from the beginning is not that they all had a personal experience of the risen Christ. It's not that they physically saw Jesus face to face.

It's that they saw for themselves the change in the disciples.

They saw what Jesus had done for them.

And they saw people whose lives were transformed for the better – people who were filled with excitement and hope and courage and determined to spread love and care to those around them.

They saw people who had found joy and purpose and were living their lives to the full.

The excitement of the friends of Jesus was a magnet.

Amazing how we humans can take great things for granted...

We all have reasons to be thankful every day of our lives, but we get used to them and get blasé about them.

We turn on the tap and there's the clean water....

We in this country are rich beyond the wildest dreams of the great majority of people on earth, but we stop thinking about that.

We can move into our dream home, get that job, marry that great person, go on that wonderful trip, buy that good car, win that prize money, but the excitement of these moments will often fade over time, as we just "get used to it" and accept it all as normal.

Studies show (for example) that when people win the lottery jackpot they become very happy and excited indeed. But after a fairly short period of time their overall happiness levels go back to whatever they were before that moment.

Amazing how we can believe and take this wonderful Easter news for granted, and settle for a humdrum church, and fail to take Jesus seriously.

Years back Mahatma Gandhi did a study of the world religions and concluded that (despite it being foreign to him) Christianity was the best. Jesus seemed to sum up life in its fullness and the life that Jesus lived seemed to him to be the greatest life of all.

But when Gandhi encountered the church he saw the huge disconnect between Jesus and the people who claim to be his followers. Gandhi remained an admirer of Christ but he couldn't bring himself to become a Christian. His problem was not Jesus but the fact that the Christians he met seemed so unlike Jesus.

Now we can all imagine the truth of this – that some people are put off Christianity not by Christ but by the poor behaviour and attitudes of his so-called followers.

Obviously that's true.

But the opposite of this is true as well.

When we live out our faith, when we take it seriously, when we determine to start living Christ's way, then even ordinary people like ourselves can draw others to him.

What started the church so well was the excitement and enthusiasm of the early followers of Christ.

The first disciples were convinced about Jesus and ready to change the world and they did!

And us?

The most important thing about Easter for others is not for us to find a way to prove something amazing happened a long time ago.

The most important thing is to show the difference that the Easter event can make today in our lives and our community.

Easter is not just the news that God did something amazing with the life of Jesus 2000 years ago.

Easter is the news that God can change all lives – including our lives – for the better.

John 20:1-18

April 5 2015 (Easter Day)