

Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley (23-1-1994 Guisborough Evangelical Church)

Starting point – the Resurrection of Jesus

Acts 1:3

Additional Bible Reading: Luke 24:13-43; Acts 1:1-5

### Introduction

Acts 1 deals with several important subjects before the story of Peter commences in chapter 2. Luke begins with the resurrection of Jesus, a vast subject with many facets. Here, two main points are made – firstly the strong evidence for the resurrection, and secondly the fact that His resurrection is the foundation of all He continues to do in the book of Acts.

### The strong evidence for the resurrection

**After His suffering, Jesus showed Himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs, or infallible proofs, that He was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days** (Acts 1:3). The Greek word πολλοῖς τεκμηρίοις translated “convincing” or “infallible” is used nowhere else in the New Testament, and only in few places in Greek literature. It means there were sure signs, positive proof, convincing and decisive. Luke was certain Jesus had risen bodily from the grave. There is nothing in his story to countenance the idea of some modern theologians that this was merely “the spirit of Jesus” living on, or the influence of Jesus still being felt by the disciples, or that the disciples were seeing visions of Jesus. No, it was a bodily resurrection. They had seen him, He had shown them His hands and His feet, and invited them to touch Him. A ghost does not have flesh and bone. He even ate broiled fish in front of them.

We have reason to make that claim even more emphatically than Luke in light of the total evidence – the living witnesses who saw Jesus, at one time, more than 500 together in one place, from a variety of people and temperaments and backgrounds, including some who were doubters at first. How could they all have been suffering from hallucination?

The tomb was empty. If the Jews could have produced His body, they would have done so, to stop the disciples from preaching the resurrection. And it is unlikely His disciples stole the body, for men do not normally give their lives for something they know to be a lie.

There was also the evidence of the remarkable change in the disciples. They were not expecting the resurrection, and they thought Jesus death was the end. The resurrection was a complete surprise, and it would have needed strong evidence to convince them. Once convinced, what a change. Their fear and despair went, and they went on to preach boldly and fearlessly. Their cowardice turned to courage, their fear to faith, the doubters became believers. They went on to turn the world upside down with their preaching. Peter who had denied Jesus, and others who had deserted Him, were now willing to give their lives for the Gospel.

Saul of Tarsus was the archenemy and chief persecutor, yet he was remarkably changed when he became convinced of the risen Jesus. Later he went on to say that his one desire was to know Christ and the power of His resurrection (Philippians 3:10). **It pleased God to reveal His Son in me** (Galatians 1:15,16).

The existence of the Christian church is further evidence. It arose and grew supremely because of the preaching of the resurrection. This belief has produced the most outstanding men the world has ever seen. Could that be based on deceit and lie? Or what caused the hardened Jews to alter the day of worship from the seventh to the first day of the week?

The New Testament is the most remarkable and influential book in the world. It is based on belief in the resurrection. Could it be based on a lie and delusion?

Then there is the evidence of personal experience. The proof of the resurrection is accessible to any man. It is powerful to invade and change lives. Christ has revolutionized thousands now living. It is possible to be indwelt by the living Lord, to feel the pressure of His greater will, and to experience a complete change in outlook and values through His power. **Christ lives in me** (Galatians 2:20).

The evidence is impressive, outstanding, and immeasurable. It is the best-attested fact in history. The former Kings Counsel, Sir Edward Clarke, said “As a lawyer I have given myself to a prolonged study of the evidences. The evidence to me is conclusive. Over and over again in the High Court I have secured a verdict on evidence not nearly so compelling.”

Another British lawyer in the early 1930’s, Frank Morrison, was sure the resurrection was a fable and fantasy. He was sure he would do the world a favour by once and for all exposing the fraud and superstition. He studied the evidence and discovered his case was not as good as he thought. He ended up writing a book very different from the one he had planned, “*Who moved the stone?*” The first chapter is entitled, “The book that refused to be written.” He confessed how, because of the evidence, he was persuaded against his will about the bodily resurrection.

The resurrection is the very heart of our faith. It is vital and central. If this is false, all else is. If it is true, all else is. Christ is alive. The Gospel is true. His promises are reliable. He can be known. We can have new life now and a sure and certain hope of life beyond the grave. The evidence for this claim is overwhelming. Luke tells us there are many convincing proofs. “Amen”, adds Christian knowledge and experience.

#### It is the foundation of all Jesus continues to do and teach

The Acts of the Apostles has to be interpreted in the light of the resurrection. Luke tells us that his former book (our third Gospel) told of all Jesus *began* to do and to teach. He implies that the present book tells of all Jesus *continues* to do and teach. That is possible only because the one who died and rose continues, in His resurrection power, to direct and guide His church and govern the affairs of the world.

The risen Lord is the chief actor; hence some prefer the title, “The Acts of the Risen Christ”. Everyone else in the book is purely an instrument in His hands, and a pawn He moves about the board. There is nothing more obvious and remarkable than the way in which, at every turn, all is referred to Jesus Christ Himself. For example, when the Apostles had to select someone to take Judas’s place, **Lord, you know everyone’s heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen to take over this apostolic ministry** (Acts 1:24,25). When Peter was called on to explain events at Pentecost, **This Jesus has poured out what you now see and hear** (Acts 2:33). He is the reason given for the large increase in the church; **The Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved** (Acts 2:47). When Peter and John healed the lame man at the Temple Gate, they were dismayed that people thought it was they who had holiness and power. **By faith in the name of Jesus, this man was made strong** (Acts 3:16).

Paul on the road to Damascus suddenly had a light shine on him, he fell to the ground blinded, and hears the voice, **I am Jesus whom you are persecuting** (Acts 9:5). Ananias is sent to Paul to give him back his sight because **The Lord told him in a vision** (Acts 9:8). Aeneas, who had been bed-ridden for 8 years, and was paralysed, Peter’s words, **Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you** (Acts 9:34). When Paul and Silas arrived in Mysia and tried to go to Bithynia, **the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them to** (Acts 16:7). On the second missionary journey, when Paul, Silas and Luke were in Philippi, Lydia was converted; **The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul** (Acts 16:14).

When Paul was in Corinth, he was encouraged by the Lord in a vision, **Do not be afraid but speak.... for I am with you... for I have many people in this city** (Acts 18:9,10). When he was in prison in Jerusalem, **the Lord stood by and said, ‘Be of good cheer Paul, for as you have testified for me in Jerusalem, so must also bear witness at Rome’** (Acts 23:11).

So at every turn in the narrative we see the risen Christ totally in control, guiding the decisions and movements of the church, pouring out the Holy Spirit, working miracles, converting people, adding people to His church, encouraging and drawing near in times of trouble and persecution, overruling events and decisions of men to ensure His purposes are carried out and His apostle arrives at the capital of the Empire itself.

Christ is the actor. He alone is the actor. The men are His implements and instruments. Consider the way in which this story picks up men and drops them, as they are merely instruments of Christ’s power. Seem so many loose ends. What happened to Philip after he left the Ethiopian eunuch? Or to Peter after the Council of Jerusalem? Why does the story end with Paul in lodgings in Rome? Why not mention his subsequent work or his future martyrdom? Why not leave out some of the details and tell us more about the ends of these great men? Human interest prompts us to ask these questions. But Luke is not interested in satisfying our human interest. He mentions these men, not for their own sake, but merely to show us how the actor in the story – the unseen risen Christ – used them and went on to use someone else.

While the Lord was using a man in a special way, he was of interest to Luke. Then the spotlight falls on someone else, and the first one is set aside. The concern and interest

is not in the men and their doings, but on the risen Christ and His activity through men. Our eyes are to be turned on Him, and not on them. Luke's main concern is the Acts of the Risen Christ.

The risen Christ raises up His men, saves them and gifts them, and gives them certain tasks to do. Then He raises up another. This is the same in every generation. Men may come and may go, but He goes on forever. Everyone inherits an unfinished task, and leaves behind an unfinished task.

Paul puts men in their place, and helps us to see things in their true perspective: **Who is Paul and who is Apollos but ministers or servants through whom you believed, as the Lord gave to each one. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. So neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase** (1 Corinthians 3:5-7).

### The relevance of these facts to us

Acts begins with the assertion of the truth and truthfulness of the Resurrection. Acts is to be interpreted in the light of the Resurrection. What does this mean to us?

We need to take heart, and realize the very solid and historical foundations of our faith. We live among people who are ignorant of even the elementary facts of the Christian faith and who know nothing of the strength of the case. They think the matter is not even worth considering. The media do not give it any publicity. Much more important is the latest Whitehall scandal or escapade of the celebrity. The world's only interest in Christian things is to highlight blasphemous denials of the way-out ecclesiastic who rejects the basics of the Gospel he is paid to defend.

Therefore as Christians we may well feel rejection, discouragement, inferiority complex. Take heart. At the centre of our faith is the risen Lord, the same yesterday, today and forever. The case for Him is built on infallible and convincing proofs, and our own experience confirms the validity of His claims and promises.

We need to get the right perspective on our Christian work and witness. We tend to make ourselves too central, it's all about our Christian work, and our Christian service. Instead, the Lord ought to be central, His plans and purposes, and we are just His pawns and instruments. "It is not what I do for God, but whether I ask Him to do His own work in me and through me." (F.B.Meyer). Our usefulness in His service is affected by the question whether we are working for God, or if we are allowing God by His Spirit to work through us. Christ ought to occupy centre stage. We must submit self to be under His mighty hand, to be a pawn that is moved about by Him and an instrument used by Him.

Hudson Taylor, intrepid missionary to China, explained his whole missionary service: "One day the Lord said to me, 'I am going to evangelise China. And I'll do it through you if you will walk with me.'" Another of his memorable sayings: "There are several ways of working for God. (a) We may make the best plans and then carry them out to the best of our ability. (b) Or having carefully laid our plans and determined to carry them through, we may ask God to help us. (c) There is yet another

mode of working; to begin with God, to ask His plans, and to offer ourselves to carry out His purposes.”

This challenge comes to us all. Think of our own lives, where they are going, what they are achieving. Think of the church. How can we reach out into our town? The words of the Lord are so true – **The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few** (Matthew 9:37). How easy to say, “I think...”, “I believe the best way forward is...”. Instead we need to begin with the Lord, put Him in the centre of the picture. What we think, and our bright ideas, is irrelevant.

What are His plans? How does He want us to go forward? Are we prepared to go His way and not our own? Am I prepared to crucify self, and submit to the Lord? Wait on the Lord. Offer yourself for His service and do His will.

*“How I praise Thee, precious Saviour,  
That Thy love laid hold of me.  
Thou hast saved and cleansed and filled me  
That I might Thy channel be.  
Channels only, blessed Master,  
But with all Thy wondrous power  
Flowing through us, Thou canst use us  
Every day and every hour.”*