

How can anyone be sure there's life after death?
(John 21:24-31)

If you could ask God one question... (Simon Rea)
Sunday Morning 10:45am 29 June 2008

We're continuing with our series on questions people would like to ask God. Last week Sam helped us to explore the question: All good people go to heaven, don't they? This week we're investigating another question of life and death: How can anyone be sure there's life after death?

Have you ever wondered why people ask questions like this, questions about what happens when we die? According to so-called experts like Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens and Polly Toynbee, [ppt] and some other scientists, philosophers and newspaper columnists. these are non-questions, questions we don't need to ask because according to them, the only sensible view of what happens when people die looks like this:

[ppt**2Death 3.**]

Death FULL STOP [ppt**2Death 3full stop**]
People die and that's it. Nothing else.

Nothing more. A full stop to their existence. A full stop? Or a black hole which sucks everything in but where nothing can come out. I wonder if anyone here today believes that? Well, as we are in church, it's perhaps not so likely that many would believe exactly what they want us to. But I wonder if anyone here today has been influenced by their ideas?

How can anyone be sure there's life after death?

One way is by the very fact that we ask the question. If the militant atheists are right, then there is no logical, no sensible reason for people to ask about life after death. But people do ask the question. People always have asked questions about life and what comes afterwards and many have tried to answer it: In the 1940s the existentialist philosopher Jean -Paul Sartre described modern culture as possessing "a God-shaped hole." A few centuries earlier, the French mathematician Blaise Pascal wrote of the God-shaped hole in each of us [that we seek to fill with all of the wrong things]. And a few centuries before that the great African philosopher and theologian Augustine of Hippo wrote about

people's hearts only finding rest in God.
So questions like this aren't new.

How can anyone be sure there's life after death? The Bible answers it quite simply. You'll find the answer in the OT at the end of a passage which is sometimes read at funerals: [God] has [also] set eternity in the hearts of men. [ppt **God set eternity**] Human beings are made in God's image, God is beyond time, eternal as the Bible puts it, so [ppt **Death x**] is not the only sensible view of what happens when people die:

The answer must look different, perhaps like this: [2Life 3... ppt]

Life goes on. Those 3 dots mean a lot. In writing and in mathematics 3 dots generally signify that something is missing, that something else is to come. Something else is to come. But what? What comes after life?

Has anyone ever watched TV after 21.00? If you have then the chances are you'll have seen one of these programmes: Ghost Whisperer, Pushing Daisies, Supernatural, Reaper etc check times and days Then

there are all the ghost chasing programmes like Most Haunted, etc.

On one level, the programmes all have one thing in common: they are all about what happens after death. They pick up on the question we're looking at this morning: But the answers they give are confused and confusing. Perhaps that's why surveys like this one taken a couple of years ago show that 70% believed in a god or some form of higher power. 71% believed in the existence of the soul but then 53% believed in an afterlife; 43% believed they have been contacted by the dead or contacted the dead themselves. 34% believed in ghosts, 37% believed in restless spirits and 3% believed in vampires.

Like it or not people's ideas are all too often shaped by the programmes they watch, from the soaps to Supernatural. People learn about life through the stories those programmes tell us about the lives of the main characters. That's why you'll find such strong storylines pushing politically correct pro-gay, anti-racist and pro-diversity agendas in them - even if this sometimes backfires.

People learn through stories. That's why we're going to explore today's question by looking at a surprising, shocking story from the Bible. It's a true story, a report of eye-witness events that surprised and shocked the people who were there and the people who first heard it. And it's a report which is directly relevant for each of us here today. Bemhigo is going to come and read it to us now:

John 21:24-31 ppt

Can you imagine what it must have been like for the followers of Jesus in those first days after his death? They had experienced so much with him. They had heard his wonderful words which brought life and liberation to those who listened. They had seen the wonders he performed which brought healing. And they had seen him betrayed and judicially murdered in the most brutal way. Jesus was dead. Even deader than Marley's doornail in Dickens' 'Christmas carol'. Many Jews of that time like the Sadducees, the intellectual priestly elite were sure there wasn't any life after death - like Dawkins and co of the

21st century. The ruling Romans mostly believed in some kind of disembodied Elysian fields kind of existence like the one in Ridley Scott's blockbuster Gladiator [**ppt**] accompanied by melancholy Celtic music, like many people today. There were different peoples with different beliefs about the afterlife but their beliefs all had one thing in common: They denied the possibility of the resurrection. Resurrection just couldn't happen. People either died. Full stop. Or they floated off into those Elysian fields. Or they had to wait without bodies for God to bring them back to life at the end of time [**blank screen**]. Doubts, disbelief and confusion were as common then as they are now.

That's why this eyewitness report is so shocking because it is so radically different from any of the common beliefs of that time - or any other time to be honest. The report is so familiar. We've all heard it before - in fact Graham was preaching about it here a few weeks ago. We're so familiar with it that we run the risk of missing the shock and surprise that those present must have felt. Thomas so often becomes the focus for talks and

our thoughts about this passage. Some people may want to identify with him because of his doubts while others may want to do the opposite for the same reason. But when we do that, we miss out on the real centre of that reading on the real point of the passage and on the way it actually points to answers to our original question about being sure that there is a life after death.

How can anyone be sure there's life after death? The simplest answer is that we can be sure that there is life after death because of what this report tells us about Jesus. Jesus returned to the room, to his followers, to those who had known and loved him, to those he had known and loved, to those who had done his head in so many times. He returned to his followers not as some kind of 'spirit', like the ones chased in celebrity ghost hunts, not as a resuscitated corpse - you know like the ones Ned the pie maker brings back to life in 'Pushing Daisies' but as a real resurrected person with a real resurrected body. His body was real. He could eat with his friends he touch people and they could him. It wasn't a disembodied 'spiritual' body like a faded

3D photograph. It was a real body - even though he could walk through walls. That's why Thomas could touch him. That's why a few days later he'd be on the beach with Thomas and 6 others eating breakfast early in the morning. Jesus' was really there with them. His body was real, in fact his body was more real than the walls and the doors because Jesus could walk through them. Jesus had come through death and he was there in the room with them. Jesus body was real and Jesus body was perfect. That's why he had the marks of the nails in his hands and spear in his sides. They were the marks of the pain he had to undergo so that we can have what the Bible calls eternal life.

The resurrection shows how eternity breaks into this world. The words behind 'eternity' and 'eternal life' in our NT translation literally mean the 'life of the age to come'. Eternal life doesn't just mean 'existence continuing without end' but the life of the age to come, life in God's time. Our reading shows us that that life, the life of the age to come starts now. All we have to do - as the end of our reading reminds us, is to believe: v31 [all these things] are

written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. Or as another famous verse from John's gospel puts it: "[For] God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" Jn 3:16. Many of you will know that just over two years ago my father died. He had been a great rugby player in his youth and had even had a trial for the All Ireland team. Over the years his lifestyle hadn't always been the most healthy but you could still see that he had been a sportsman. He died of pancreatic cancer which had spread throughout his body. I was privileged to spend a lot of time with him at the end and one thing that sticks in my mind from that time is the comfort from knowing that he had made a personal commitment to Christ when he was young so he could be part of that life of the age to come and with that a perfect resurrection body which the Bible promises.

Our reading also suggests another answer to the question and it's more immediate and more personal than you might think.

How can anyone be sure there's life after death? Because you are here this morning. Each of us is here in this building this morning for 2 reasons. One is because God has called you. He may have called you directly or he may have called you indirectly through another person. But he did call you here. The other reason is that the church exists at all. The existence of the church and your presence here this morning are 2 more. If you think back to our reading and what we all know about the end of the gospels, it's amazing to think that there is a church at all. The disciples were few in number, weak and frightened and now there are over 2 billion Christians in the world - and the church is still growing! Christian faith rests on the resurrection of Jesus and the promise of eternal life that brings. No Jesus, no resurrection, no church. But the church does exist because it proclaims the resurrection of Jesus and the possibility of eternal life for all who follow him.

How can anyone be sure there's life after death? Because 'God set eternity in our hearts'. Because we are human beings, created by God in his image to have a

relationship with him, a relationship that starts now and goes on for ever.

How can anyone be sure there's life after death? Because of the resurrection. The resurrection shows what happens when God himself comes to heal and to restore his world. It is not only a *new creation*. It is *new creation*. Because of the resurrection eternal life, the life of the age to come, life with God forever, because of the resurrection, all that is open to each of us. Our reading reminds us that the resurrection gives us a choice. We can reject it and the wonderful promise it brings or we can accept it by believing that Jesus Christ is the Messiah, the Son of God and so have life in his name.

The choice is yours. When push comes to shove no-one can convince you that there is life after death if you don't want to be convinced about it...