

Missing – presumed alive (evidence for the resurrection)

Something very curious happened to me yesterday. David, who cuts the grass beyond my garden called me over. There on the ground was a fox. We saw it was a juvenile fox but well and truly dead.

Later that evening, I went to deal with it and give the fox a burial (theological alert- should that be a Christian burial?!). NO FOX!

Where on earth was the body? I did see a fox scurper from another area of the small green space. Was that it and maybe the fox I saw had been asleep? Unlikely you might say if humans had approached it. Had I dreamt the episode? Maybe it had been removed by the gardener? Immediately I phoned David. He was as mystified as I was, intending to bury it properly next day. But he had also seen the young fox so it wasn't just me hallucinating.

Either it was not fully dead in the first place or had been dragged away by its friends. Possibly.

At one time in my career, I worked in long lost days when the Department for Industry offered some support to struggling companies. Remind you of anything now perchance? Part of my job was to make assessments in my area to see if makers of candles from Cumbria warranted support (I speak metaphorically!). What was needed was strong evidence- an evidence base before that term became fashionable. I had to sift through competing claims and factual evidence and make a Report.

It had become clear to me that the evidence for Jesus returning to life was annoyingly strong. With one act, resurgent rumours of resurrection would be shown up as fabricated. The powers that be had every incentive not to make a Jesus-shrine or anoint him with martyrdom. What became a growing Christian movement would be detonated with immediate effect if a dead body produced.

Maybe Jesus was not really dead? The fox seemed dead and could have been stunned. Certainly there were no signs of gory death. Jesus' body, however, was lacerated with savage wounds by past-masters of the killing art. To make sure, a soldier took a spear and plunged it through Jesus' heart.

Maybe Jesus' friends dragged the body away? Possibly, but why would they then be prepared to go to the ends of the earth, risk persecution, ostracism and even face crucifixion themselves for a lie? Plus they didn't believe it at first. Mary supposed it was the gardener that had dragged it away!

And how do we account for gathering annals of witnesses who claimed to have seen Jesus? Not just one or two be it said. On one occasion some five hundred saw Jesus alive: not bad for hallucination. Somehow, if not really fully dead, Jesus had managed to re-assure them that he was vibrant with new life and in sober, earnest tones, convince them that he had overcome death – our last enemy.

In John's Gospel chapter 14, we read what Jesus said at what we call the Last Supper the night before his terrible ordeal. "I will not leave you orphanless", he re-assures them. "I am coming to you. Shortly, the world will no longer see me but you will see me" (v18-19). When puzzled people asked how this could be and what form that could possibly take, Jesus was clear. He was going but the Holy Spirit would communicate the living presence of a living Lord. "Because I live you will live also." (v19)

This was to be a new dynamic, a new way of understanding and experiencing God. And it's internal. "You are already acquainted with the Spirit. He has been with you but will now be IN YOU" (V17).

Of course at times like this, we all want the hope and comfort that life is not falling apart and that the centre can hold. Jesus is brimming over with an endless love to them and bedrock re-assurance that peace will be given to them to still and soothe their anxious hearts. His friends saw calm peace and poise with which he faced the continent of pressure upon him. But now he promises "Peace I leave with you: my peace I give to you" (v27). That is a powerful antidote to the anxiety of our day with stress and distress troubling us. Let's pray, love, care and share where we can. But there's more

We can experience something beyond the inner calm that comes from being connected to God (how's your internet connection by the way? – so much of our present life seems to depend on it!).

Why not discover the calm energising power that comes from internalising the Holy Spirit? "Preach the inward witness", John Wesley urged his 18th century preachers when revival shook the nation. "Preach the inward witness – it's the strongest proof of Christianity."

It certainly is. We can assess for ourselves the reasonableness of resurrection but there's something more than calm weighing of rational evidence though that is a good place to start. The strongest proof that Jesus actually came back from death and therefore changes everything is that we experience something of his coming to us personally. "Because I live, you will live also".

I am recording this from the inside of a church, which we are allowed to do for the first time. Though we long for the re-gathering, as long as we do it safely, we can find something in the here and now. In two weeks, Pentecost will arrive with its re-vitalising power to renew and transform. Experiencing it for ourselves is the most certain way to know anything. Why not repent, re-orientate and receive?

"Lord, come to me", we can pray. "Come to me". Or as an old hymn has it:

"Come to my heart O thou wonderful love
Come and abide
Lifting my life till it rises above
Envy and falsehood and pride"