

# THE FIRSTBORN FROM THE DEAD

## Colossians 1v18.

This is a good example of the way an expository series can throw up a text in a timely and relevant way. **He (Jesus) is the beginning and the firstborn from the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.** This Tuesday sees the funeral of Elsie Maltman – a first for County Church Wansbeck. At the same time some members in our church family are facing the challenge of serious illness. So I come to this text believing that one of the most effective ways to be a good pastor is through biblical teaching, and that God is eager to speak in our time of need.

Exploring a text like this is sometimes like an archaeological dig - there are different layers to explore. When you discover something near the surface it doesn't mean you look no further - on the contrary, it encourages you to dig deeper. This is how it is with this text. There are fresh discoveries to make as you keep digging. So first, the truth lying near the surface:

### 1. Jesus was raised from the dead

**The firstborn from the dead** is direct reference to His bodily resurrection. Yes, there had been other reported instances of people being raised from the dead – including some raised by Jesus. But each of these people died again. The most astonishing example in the Gospels is Lazarus, a man whose corpse was decomposing. Jesus raised him and then said: *“I am the resurrection and the life.”* (John 11v25) Yet there came a day when Lazarus died again. But when Jesus was raised from the dead He appeared with an incorruptible resurrection body and He didn't die again. From the very start Jesus' resurrection was proclaimed as central to the gospel message.

Now, as we dig a little deeper into this text, we find something else.

### 2. Jesus' resurrection announces the dawning of a new day

There are two fundamental ways of viewing the bodily resurrection of Jesus. One is to regard it as absurd. Things like this just don't happen. This is the perspective of some theologians who have difficulty with the idea of miracles. God doesn't interfere with His creation. What on earth would God be playing at raising a man from the dead? If by any chance it did happen – then it was a one-off, an aberration, an oddity.

The other is to see Jesus' resurrection as a cross-roads moment in history. Isaiah and Malachi had prophesied that the coming of Messiah would be like the sun rising and the dawning of a new day. (Isaiah 9v2, Malachi 4v2) In our text Paul says it is “Day 1” of a new creation. **Jesus is the beginning.** Any use of this expression by a Jewish writer involved a backward glance at Genesis 1v1. *“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth”*. It was code for the idea of God as creator. Something new is being brought into

being. Nothing will ever be the same again after this. It has started something that can never be stopped.

Tom Wright comments that sometimes human beings are confronted with something which they must either reject outright or which, if they accept it, will demand the remaking of their worldview. He imagines a rich former member of an Oxbridge college giving the college a glorious painting which is so magnificent that eventually they decide to pull down the college and rebuild it around the gift. Having done so they discover that all the best features of the college are enhanced and the familiar problems have been dealt with. This is the choice before us. We can sideline the resurrection of Jesus or we can see that it changes everything. The resurrection of Jesus, says Tom Wright, is *“not an absurd event within the old world, but the symbol and starting point of the new world. The claim advanced by Christianity is of that magnitude.”* (‘Surprised by Hope’. SPCK)

This new day that has dawned has changed so much, but in this instance Paul fastens on one specific thing.

### **3. Jesus has brought into being a new resurrection people.**

*“If anyone is in Christ he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!”* (2 Corinthians 5v17) This is only possible because Jesus is **the first-born from the dead**. Something gloriously new has been created – a new humanity, a people filled with the resurrection life of Jesus by the Holy Spirit. People like you and me. We are now His resurrection people and the heralds of His new creation.

We were dead in our sins. That was our condition before we put our faith in Christ. But now we have been born again and have received eternal life. When someone is baptized as a believer we see this played out in the person going down into the water and coming up again. Our old life is buried and we start a new resurrection life. Romans 6v4 says: *“We were buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.”*

Yet we are not just a resurrection people in this life. There is another great discovery to make here.

### **4. Jesus’ resurrection is the guarantee of ours**

**He is the firstborn from the dead**, the first of many who will be raised incorruptible at the great day of resurrection. This is very good news for you and me. Our future is intertwined with Jesus. If He was raised, then so will we.

Many who never give God a thought, when they face death, lapse into sentimental thinking assuming there is something after death. *“John Brown’s body lies a mouldering in the grave but his soul goes marching on.”* They believe in some kind of immortality. But our future hope is rooted in Jesus who died and was raised from the dead. Our resurrection is connected to His.

This is why belief in the bodily resurrection of Jesus is so important. Paul discusses this in 1 Corinthians 15. *“Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep.”* (v20) The first-fruits of the harvest were offered to God as the first instalment of the full crop. They were a pledge of the full harvest and the sign that *a process had begun* which was inevitable. In the same way there is a connection between Christ's resurrection and ours. Jesus' resurrection comes first and our resurrection is guaranteed by His. This is a truth we need to celebrate.

But “firstborn” doesn't just mean first in chronological order. It means first in importance. This leads us to the final “layer” of meaning.

## **5. Jesus' resurrection declares that He is Lord.**

Jesus is Lord over all things. He said: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” (Matthew 28v18) This includes death. **He is the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might have the supremacy.**

When we or our loved ones face serious illness Jesus' Lordship over our life is more than a heart-warming thought. It is solid rock to stand upon. Nor is it just abstract doctrine – it has huge personal and practical implications.

Because Jesus is Lord it is important we keep our eyes on Him

Some focus on themselves: “What have I done wrong?” or, “What do I need to put right?” Yes, it is good to make sure you have a clear account with God, but don't be dominated by guilt and miss out on the grace of God.

Others focus on the illness. Yes, it's good to know what you're up against, but don't fill your mind with too much medical stuff. It may just fuel fearful thoughts. Fill your mind with Scriptural truth. And remember, Jesus has been given the name above every name (including the names of illnesses.)

Some people focus on the devil. They conclude that this is a terrible onslaught of the enemy and so they give him far too much attention. No, fix your eyes on Jesus. Our knowledge is so limited. Concentrate on what you do know – *“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? ... I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”* (Romans 8 35-39)

Others focus on “faith” rather than Jesus; or they embrace a particular theory about sickness or healing. In one of my churches we were plagued by someone distributing tapes by an American “faith” teacher who said that consulting doctors or taking medicine demonstrated a lack of faith; just pray and believe and you will be healed; don't worry if the symptoms persist – take it by faith - you *are* healed! For one family in the church this teaching ended in great sadness and confusion.

## Because Jesus is Lord He is more powerful than any sickness

This is the ground upon which we pray for miracles of healing. Jesus has all authority in heaven and on earth, and consequently He loves to bring heaven to earth. Every healing is a foretaste of the future when there will be no more sickness. He is Lord! Therefore He can heal and deliver us at any moment. *“Jesus, Jesus, Healer, Saviour, Strong deliverer. How we love you.”*

Many of us have either experienced some kind of healing or know someone who has been healed after prayer. James 5 instructs us, when we are sick, to call the elders of the church to anoint us with oil and pray for healing. Over these next weeks and months we will be gathering in different homes to pray for miracles of healing; and you will be praying personally and in families.

## Because Jesus is Lord we can look death in the eye

The New Testament says death is an enemy, but it is a *defeated* enemy. Jesus has taken on death and conquered it. We still have to face death but it has lost its terrible poisonous sting. It is quite normal to still feel scared. This is no disgrace. The key is to allow this fear and anxiety to cast you on God; to draw you nearer to the Lord Jesus Christ. But we don't have to cower from death or live in denial.

When a Christian faces death it should make such a difference. Apparently as Oliver Cromwell lay dying he looked at the gloomy faces around him and said *“Is there no-one here who will praise the Lord?”* I have had the privilege of ministering among Christian people who have looked death straight in the eye. In Littlehampton Joe Utting was diagnosed with cancer. When I visited him he said: *“John, if this is my time I want to go out in Calvary Glory.”* It wasn't his time as a matter of fact, but I still recall his faith and courage. He looked death in the eye because Jesus is Lord.

It is a difficult line to keep, but we really must give equal attention to praying with faith for healing *and* looking death in the eye. It is so easy to emphasize one at the expense of the other. On the one hand we can so over-emphasize healing that it gives the impression we must put off death at all costs, or it can leave people unprepared for dying well. On the other hand we can so concentrate on accepting the medical prognosis that we hardly give a thought to prayer for healing and leave no room for a miracle. I suspect that most of us lean one way or the other, so we must help each other along.

But more than anything we need to look to Jesus. **He is the beginning and the firstborn from the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.**

John Wilthew. March 2008

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### MESSAGE SUMMARY

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Exploring a text like this is sometimes like an archaeological dig - there are different layers to explore. So first, the truth lying near the surface:

**1. Jesus was raised from the dead:** *“The firstborn from the dead”* is a direct reference to His bodily resurrection. Yes, there had been other reported instances of people being raised from the dead – including some raised by Jesus. But each of these people died again. But when Jesus was raised He appeared with a resurrection body and He didn't die again. From the very start Jesus' resurrection was proclaimed as central to the gospel message.

**2. Jesus' resurrection announces the dawning of a new day** There are two fundamental ways of viewing the bodily resurrection of Jesus. One is to regard it as absurd. Things like this just don't happen. If by any chance this did happen – then it was an oddity. The other is to see Jesus' resurrection as a cross-roads moment in history. Isaiah and Malachi had prophesied that the coming of Messiah would be like the dawning of a new day. Paul says it is “Day 1” of a new creation. *“He is the beginning”* involves a backward glance at Genesis 1v1. Something new was being brought into being. Nothing will be the same again after this.

**3. Jesus has brought into being a new resurrection people.** *“If anyone is in Christ he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!”* (2 Cor. 5v17) Something gloriously new has been created - a people filled with the resurrection life of Jesus. People like you and me. We were dead in our sins, but now we are born again and have received eternal life. When someone is baptized as a believer this is played out in the person going down into the water and coming up again

**4. Jesus' resurrection is the guarantee of ours:** *“He is the firstborn from the dead”*, the first of many who will be raised incorruptible at the great day of resurrection. Our future is intertwined with Jesus. If He was raised, then so will we. *“Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep.”* (1 Cor. 15 v20) The first-fruits of the harvest were offered to God as the first instalment of the full crop. They were a pledge of the full harvest and the sign that a *process had begun* which was inevitable. In the same way there is a connection between Christ's resurrection and ours. Jesus' resurrection comes first and our resurrection is guaranteed by His.

**5. Jesus' resurrection declares that He is Lord.** He said: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” (Matthew 28v18) *“He is the firstborn from the dead, that in all things he might have the supremacy.”* This includes death. When we or our loved ones face serious illness Jesus' Lordship over our life is more than a heart-warming thought. It is solid rock to stand upon. Nor is it just abstract doctrine – it has huge personal and practical implications. Let's explore some of them

- (i) Because Jesus is Lord it is important we keep our eyes on Him
- Some focus on themselves: “What have I done wrong?” It is good to make sure you have a clear account with God, but don’t miss out on God’s grace.
  - Others focus on the illness. Don’t fill your mind with too much medical stuff. It may just fuel fearful thoughts. Fill your mind with Scriptural truth.
  - Some people conclude that this is a terrible onslaught from the enemy and so they give him far too much attention. No, fix your eyes on Jesus.
  - Others focus on “faith” rather than Jesus; or they embrace a particular theory of healing which takes them off at a tangent.
- (ii) Because Jesus is Lord He is more powerful than any sickness
- This is the ground upon which we pray for miracles of healing. Jesus has all authority in heaven and on earth. Every healing is a foretaste of the future when there will be no more sickness.
  - Many of us have either experienced some kind of healing or know someone who has been healed after prayer. James 5 instructs us, when we are sick, to call the elders to anoint us with oil and pray for healing. There are many other ways God can break in with healing. We want to see and hear of great miracles of healing among us.
- (ii) Because Jesus is Lord we can look death in the eye
- The New Testament says death is an enemy, but it is *a defeated* enemy. Jesus has taken on death and conquered it. We still have to face death, and the thought may still scare us, but death has lost its terrible poisonous sting.
  - When a Christian faces death it should make such a difference. Apparently as Oliver Cromwell lay dying he looked at the gloomy faces around him and said “*Is there no-one here who will praise the Lord?*”
  - It is a difficult line to keep but we really must give equal attention to praying with faith for healing *and* looking death in the eye. It is so easy to emphasize one at the expense of the other. I suspect that most of us lean one way or the other, so we must help each other along.

## **SUGGESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION**

Was there some specific way in which you felt encouraged or stirred or helped by Sunday’s message?

Read 1 Corinthians 15v1-8 & v12-21. Why is the resurrection of Jesus so important, according to this passage?

How does the Christian hope differ from the ideas many people in the UK have about life after death?

When you (or those dear to you) hit serious health challenges – what attempts to help and encourage you do you find (a) *most* helpful and (b) *least* helpful?

Share (a) some of the ways in which we can pray for God to break in among us with healing power, and (b) some examples of healing in response to prayer.

How can we walk the difficult line of giving equal attention to praying with faith for healing *and* looking death in the eye? Do you lean more one way than the other?

