

**St Mark's Sermon Series on the Apostle's Creed  
Andre Kyme, Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> September 2020**

*"On the third day he rose again from the dead;  
he ascended into heaven,  
and is seated at the right hand of the Father;  
from there he will come to judge the living and the dead."*

**Prayer**

*Father, thank you for teaching us the truth. Would you please help us to put aside any distractions from our minds now, and would you open our hearts to the amazing realities contained in this part of the Creed. Help us, we pray, see how these realities should change the way we think and live right now. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

**DRAMA ("Events")**

Try to imagine yourself as one of Jesus' close disciples. You've been completely drawn to the character and words of this man for months if not years, even though at times what He's said has been a bit confusing. But a deep sense of sadness and confusion, mixed with fear, has come over you and your friends since Friday, that horrible of days when your master (because that's really what He's come to mean to you) was harassed and hung up on a cross to die. Sadness, that is, until today. It's now Sunday morning and a strange but unmistakable joy is starting to fill your heart. It's lunchtime, and what began as a confusing murmur early this morning has become a chorus of testimony that Jesus' tomb is empty, His body gone. Some have even seen and spoken with him – alive!

In the coming days – 40 of them to be precise – that seed of joy you felt on the Sunday will abound as you and others encounter the risen Jesus yourself; as you speak to Him and hear Him speak; as you see and touch his new body; and as He gives you understanding of what His new life means. They'll be unforgettable days. Precious days. And then, in another unforgettable moment, Jesus will rise up before you, physically, and disappear as He returns to God the Father in heaven.

Now fast forward an indeterminate amount of time – countless generations and history flashing past – to Jesus' return and a moment when life and existence as we know it, will utterly change. A moment that's *unmistakable* – an experience of light, noise and splendour in which we'll all simply know, this is it. A moment that's *unexpected* – coming suddenly like a thief in the night. And a moment that's *unavoidable* – an ultimate reckoning, before Jesus, that nobody can dodge.

Well that's the drama of this section of the Apostle's Creed we're unpacking today:

*"On the third day He rose from the dead and ascended into heaven. From there He will come to judge the living and the dead."*

The events in this part of the Creed can seem very foreign and strange to us – because they really are. Even so, the Bible unambiguously says they're reality. Which means we've really got to reckon with their meaning and implications. And I want to say up front that the implications are both profound and very practical.

The 3 key statements about Jesus in this part of the Apostle's Creed are: that He rose from the dead; that He ascended to heaven at the Father's side; and that He'll return to judge. We're going to consider each one in turn using the framework we've used throughout the series: doctrine ("truth"), discipleship ("life"), doxology ("praise"). Have the 1 Corinthians passage handy because I'll refer to it often. It'll also help to have the sermon outline handy, although Issy's going to pop up the outline on the screen as we go.

## DOCTRINE (“Truth”)

### RESURRECTION

What can we say about the truth of the resurrection?

- **History**

We’ve got to start with historicity because what Christians believe about the resurrection depends on it being a real event in time and space. That’s what Paul says so matter-of-factly in v14: “...if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.” The NT writers give us 3 pieces of evidence for the resurrection: (i) the tomb was empty; (ii) Jesus was seen, heard and touched over a period of 40 days after his resurrection. Notice v6 – Peter, then the Twelve, then over 500 others, then James and the apostles again. And that isn’t even an exhaustive list. And (iii), the early believers’ proclamation had the resurrected Jesus front and centre.

Taken together – the empty tomb, the appearances of Jesus after His death, and the conviction of the disciples (many of whom suffered for that conviction) – is the NT ‘evidence’ for the bodily resurrection of Jesus. If the historicity of the resurrection is an obstacle for you, I can suggest some good resources. There really are compelling and coherent reasons to believe that Jesus’ resurrection is historical fact.

- **Confirmation**

The second truth about the resurrection I’ve called *confirmation*. That’s because the resurrection was God the Father’s divine “Yes!” to Jesus’ atonement for our sin on the cross. Everything needed to secure our forgiveness before God was accomplished in Jesus’ death and resurrection. That’s what Paul means in v17 when he says – “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile, you are still in your sins.” The implication is that if Christ has been raised, you’re *no longer* in your sins. Jesus has paid for your sin in full. The resurrection is proof and confirmation of this.

- **Victory**

And thirdly, the resurrection’s clearly about *victory*. In the first place it’s Jesus’ *own* victory, putting sin and evil to death, and of course putting death to death. But what’s quite incredible is that by being connected to Jesus as a Christian, it’s also *our* victory. That’s what Paul means when he says in v55: “‘Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?’ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Now we’ve got to affirm from the Bible that this victory of Jesus has an *immediate* effect. Every person who repents from living a self-centred life and chooses instead a Christ-centred life – immediately shares in Jesus’ victory over sin, evil and death. They’re safe – now and forever. But we’ve also got to affirm from the Bible that we’re *yet* to experience the full effects of Jesus’ victory. Paul acknowledges that here when he says that we’re still in perishable bodies and that death will only be completely done away with when Christ returns – v54: “When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: ‘Death has been swallowed up in victory.’”

So Christians live with a tension. The effects of sin still trouble us while we have flesh and blood, though it lacks any power over us. And though physical death is our lot, it’s merely like a petrol stop on the way to our final imperishable destination<sup>1</sup>.

### ASCENSION

Let’s turn then to the ascension. The ascension of Jesus doesn’t get nearly the same air time among Christians as His resurrection, and yet it’s a vital event – which is why it’s been captured in the Creed. The ascension is Jesus being taken up, physically, into God’s presence in heaven 40 days after His resurrection. So what should we say about the ascension?

- **History**

Again we start with *history*. Although only Luke records the historical event of the ascension in Luke 24 and Acts 1, many NT writers explicitly refer to it. So, like the resurrection, the ascension of Jesus is not symbolic or metaphorical, it’s a real, witnessed event in history.

- **Exaltation**

Second, Jesus' resurrection and ascension together represent His *exaltation*<sup>2</sup>. His seated enthronement at God the Father's right hand. He's literally God's right-hand-man. The NT gives us a stunning line-up of descriptions of Jesus' exalted status. Imagine one of these descriptions on your CV:

- Crowned with glory and honour (Heb 2:9)
- All things coming under His feet (1 Cor 15:26)
- Lord above all lords (Rev 19:6)
- Far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come (Eph 1:21)

Jesus is exalted.

- **Rule**

And thirdly, Jesus' exaltation implies His *rule*. At the University where I work, it's the Vice Chancellor who really runs the show day by day. The Chancellor – although higher in rank than the VC – sits in the background more like a figurehead than a ruler. Jesus, though, isn't just a figurehead with a great title, sitting on a throne but basically doing nothing. He's actively ruling the cosmos. He's commanding, and people, things and powers are responding. The ascension of Jesus teaches us the reality that we all live under Jesus' supreme rule. As the early church proclaimed, and Christians ever since have proclaimed: *Jesus is Lord*.

## RETURN TO JUDGE

The third key statement in this part of the Creed zeroes in on Jesus' *return*. His return is mentioned over 250 times in the NT, so it's no ambiguous doctrine – it's plain and central<sup>3</sup>. And the NT teaches us many things about Jesus' return – but the focus in the Apostle's Creed is on judgement. So that'll be my focus too. What then can we say about the truth of the judgement?

- **Universally unavoidable**

First of all, it's universally unavoidable. It's universal in that nobody's exempt. That's what the Creed's capturing with the phrase "*the living and the dead*". Judgement will include everyone alive at the time Jesus returns, and everyone who's ever been alive. No exceptions. His return is also unavoidable. That's what Paul said, you may have noticed, to the Athenians in the Acts 17 passage we read – v30: "*In the past God overlooked [our sinful ignorance], but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he's set a day when he'll judge the world with justice by the man he's appointed. He's given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.*" Jesus' return to judge is certain precisely because He's alive and ruling right now.

- **Good news**

Second, Jesus' return to judge is *very good news* – for those who love Jesus that is. For them, His piercing judgement can't touch them – because He's already been judged for them. His death and resurrection *count* for them. So for them it'll be a moment of sheer exhilaration in fully experiencing Jesus' victory over sin, evil and death. As Paul says in v51: "*Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed – in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.*"

- **Bad news**

But sadly, the return of Jesus to judge is *very bad news* for those who've refused to love Him as Lord. The verdict that Jesus will make about you and me when He returns will depend entirely on the verdict that you and I made about Him while we were alive. And that verdict will be final.

Jesus Himself spoke very candidly about the fate of those who refuse Him – a fate He called hell. And He used several very vivid images to communicate the reality of hell – images like darkness, fire, weeping, exclusion. This is an example of the Bible using images to explain a reality that we have no present experience of to relate to. But as one writer has said, "the images don't say everything, but they won't mislead us." When Simon's invited me to preach, I've really wanted to avoid preaching on the judgement. Not because I don't believe it; but because I do. Hell is awesomely serious. As the writer of Hebrews says: "*It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.*"

## DISCIPLESHIP (“Life”)

Ok, let’s turn now to “Discipleship” – what do these truths mean for our daily life? Again we’ll look at each of the 3 areas in turn, starting with Jesus’ resurrection.

### RESURRECTION

What does Jesus’ resurrection mean, then, for life now?

- **Assurance**

Number 1: assurance. In His resurrection, the God-man Jesus took our flesh-and-blood humanity right into the throne room of God – on the other side of God’s wrath – well beyond the reach of judgement. And if you belong to Jesus then this safety in the presence of God is yours too. Because when you put your trust in Jesus, the Bible says that you are united with him in His death, and united with Him in His resurrection. This is a reality right now and we have a taste of safety in the presence of God through His Spirit. But one day we’ll even know safety in the face-to-face presence of God. Be assured.

- **Meaningful labour**

Second, meaningful labour. The resurrection of Jesus means that everything we do for the Lord in this life counts. This is actually Paul’s main point after his long discussion of the resurrection in 1 Cor 15. Notice his conclusion in v58: *“Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain.”* The resurrection means that everything we do for the Lord in this life counts. It wouldn’t if death were the end. So don’t give up. Instead, ask the Lord to show you how you can give yourself fully to Him, and pray for the strength to do it. The resurrection means meaningful labour that has effects right into eternity.

- **Hope**

And thirdly, hope. Christians look forward to living beyond the grave in a new place with new bodies – bodies that are physical, but radically different – not flesh and blood. Bodies customised for an entirely new state of things that will come into being when Jesus returns. Jesus’ resurrection not only shows us that this imperishable future is real, it guarantees that all His people will share in it. So this world, and our bodies, with all the weakness and limitations and sadness that weighs on us throughout this life – is not the end game. Something so incredible and wonderfully different awaits – so incredible and different that the Bible can only give us word pictures to describe it. Imagine, for example, trying to explain to a fat, slow, leaf-chomping caterpillar what the freedom of flying as a butterfly through fields of sweet-smelling, nectar-filled flowers is like! Nothing in our present experience can really help us grasp what it will be like. All we know is that because the resurrected Jesus is real, that future is real, it’s sure and it’s great. The resurrection means hope.

### ASCENSION

What about the ascension? What does it mean for life?

- **Foregoing control**

First of all, the ascension means *freedom to forego control*. Everything that happens in the present age happens under the absolutely supreme Lordship of Jesus. It’s hard to overstate what this means for how we view what happens in life – and especially the freedom it gives us to stop trying to control everything ourselves! For those of us who’ve been united to Jesus, we can relax and not worry about everything happening according to our script. Who or what are you wearing yourself out trying to control? Your young children? Your adult children? Your spouse? Your career? Your health? The ascension reminds us: someone really strong and really committed to us is in control of all these things. Taking to heart the reality of Jesus’ ascension is to allow yourself a peace in life’s circumstances that would otherwise make little sense.

- **Accessing power**

Secondly, the ascension means Christians have access to the immense power of the risen and ascended Jesus by His Spirit. Paul knew this when he prayed in Eph 1: *“I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand.”*

Oughtn't we take every opportunity to access Jesus' power, by prayer, to renew us, sustain us and enable us to walk the path He's marked out for us?

- **Inspiring mission**

And thirdly, the ascension of Jesus *inspires mission*. Just before He ascended, Jesus said to His disciples: *"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples..."* One of the most obvious implications of the risen and ascended Jesus is for us to help people recognise His Lordship and submit to Him. This was the definitely the instinctive response of the early disciples when Jesus was taken up before them. They immediately started to proclaim: Jesus is Lord. And perhaps it could become more instinctive for us too when we allow the truth of the ascension to sink in.

## RETURN TO JUDGE

Ok, lastly: Jesus' return to judge. What will *this* mean for life now?

- **Watchful**

When Jesus spoke to His disciples about His return, perhaps His greatest encouragement was to *watchfulness*. That is – be ready! It'll be too late to change our response to Jesus when we're standing in front of Jesus. So it matters hugely that a person chooses *now* to love Him. So I want implore you then, on Christ's behalf, come to Him – while there's time. Please don't find yourself before Him unprepared. *"Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him."*

But watchfulness also applies to Christians. We shouldn't underestimate how easily we might get lulled into a kind of middle-class stupor that misses the point of the times we're in, the purpose of our discipleship, how He might want to use us to bring in His harvest. Being watchful means reminding ourselves of the Biblical realities that we've been thinking about today. Jesus is exalted and He is coming back. As Christians, how are we going to make the most of the time?

- **Prayerful**

And secondly, the imminent return of Christ to judge urges us to *prayer*. Of course this includes prayer for ourselves, but I'm thinking mainly here of prayer for those who urgently need to welcome Jesus the Lord before His decisive return. Last week I confessed to a Christian brother that I do find myself losing heart when I don't see loved ones I've been praying for, for such a long time, turning to Christ. His encouragement to me was simple. Andre, don't give up. Don't lose heart. The Lord hears. The Lord cares. So keep praying for them. It's what I needed to hear. And it's what I also want to encourage you with. Keep praying for them. Don't give up. Don't lose heart.

## DOXOLOGY ("Thanks")

Jesus' resurrection; Jesus' ascension to rule at God's side; and Jesus' return to judge. These are 3 immense realities. All three make a massive difference to the *future* we'll all face. But I trust you can see how each one of them also makes a massive difference to life *right now*. As we finish, I want to use the words of praise that the elders and creatures around God's throne in Revelation 19 used:

*"And they cried:*

*"Amen, Hallelujah!"*

*Then a voice came from the throne, saying: "Praise our God, all you his servants, you who fear him, both great and small!" Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting: "Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready... Then the angel said to me, "Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!" And he added, "These are the true words of God.""*

## Notes

- (1) Everyone is destined to die once and then face judgement (Heb 9:27). There is physical death which is a result of sin and a form of judgement (Gn 2:17; Ps 90:7-11; Rom 5:12; Rom 6:23; 1 Cor 15:21; Jas 1:15). But there is also a second death – death as final judgement (Lk 12:4ff; Heb 2:14ff; Heb 9:27). Physical death is inevitable but not terminal; not terminal because of the Bible’s insistence that the believer’s body will be raised (1 Cor 15:35-58); Christians expect and look forward to life with a new resurrection body which Christ will give us at His appearing (1 Cor 15:42-44).
- (2) We might ask – if Jesus is the “image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15), “before all things” (Col 1:17), the one “by whom and for whom all things were created” (Col 1:16, Heb 1:2), and “our God and Saviour” (not just Saviour) (2 Pet 1:1), in what sense then could He be ‘exalted’ or ‘appointed’ to this new position of Lord over all? Surely as God, He’s always been as high and exalted as He could be? The answer is ‘yes’ – as God the Son, Jesus has always been Lord and exalted. But in His resurrection and ascension, there is a new experience of exaltation for Jesus – not in His role as God (which he’d always had), but in His role as Messiah (mediator between God and people), which He fulfilled.
- (3) Jesus’ return will be:
- Unmistakable (Mat 24:27)
  - Glorious (Mat 24:30, Rev 1:7, Dan 7:13, Acts 1:9, 11) – this is the coming of the King!
  - Sudden (Mat 24:37-44, 1 Thes 5:1-6, Mk 13:32)
  - Decisive (1 Cor 15:24) – the end will come

In short: Jesus return will be a sudden, amazing and universally-recognised moment that will be utterly climactic for life as we know it. It’s precisely for this reason that the Bible sometimes resorts to figurative descriptions – that’s because nothing in our present experience can prepare us to understand what it will be like.