

I've been in 3 tombs in Israel.

I've visited the tomb in the ancient Church of the Resurrection in Jerusalem. It has a good claim to being very close to the actual tomb of Jesus. It is now a hollowed out cave, surrounded by a church, pilgrims and candles. When I visited this tomb I realized I was very close to history. Pilgrim Christians had been treating this place as sacred since almost within a generation or two of the time of Jesus.

When Jennifer and our sons Mark and Scott were inside the tomb praying, I almost felt we shouldn't take too long because there were other people waiting outside. None the less is a tomb from the first century, outside the then city walls.

It didn't take a lot of imagination to strip away the church and the candles, and then to picture the women coming to the tomb early on the Sunday morning. I can see why a resurrection from this tomb changed the timid disciples into bold leaders of the Jesus movement. Such a resurrection would indeed prompt those early Jewish followers of Jesus to change their holy day from Saturday to Sunday. There is strong history behind the Easter events. It includes the claim of the Jesus movement they had seen the risen Jesus. They started singing hymns and songs to Jesus as if to the Lord God. To symbolize their experience they plunged people into water and lifted them back out again, and they said this was like dying and rising with Jesus. They said that when they shared Jesus meal of bread and wine, that they were keenly aware of His risen life within them. Of course none of this proves faith. Faith can't be proved, or for that matter disproved. But it does mean that we are on solid historical footings. But solid historical footings are not enough.

The second tomb I visited in Jerusalem is known as the Garden Tomb. It is lovely setting. It is an open air setting in a hill just north of the old city of Jerusalem. In my opinion it has no great claims to being historically accurate. However it is a place where you can sit for a while and breathe fresh air not candle smoke. There is sky and rock and garden. When I visited there I sat on a bench under a tree and pondered. I pondered the meaning of the resurrection of Jesus.

The resurrection of Jesus by the Father is the Father's almighty "yes" to Jesus life, work and death. Forgiveness and a new start? Achieved. Powers of death defeated? Done. Jesus as the start of a new redeemed community? Underway.

We Christians do well to remember that we do not really believe in the immortality of the soul. We believe in the resurrection of Jesus and that we become partners in His resurrection. We don't believe in the spark of eternity in our spirits. We believe that as we die with Christ, so we will be raised with Christ. In the Apostles Creed we say we believe in the resurrection of the body. That is we believe that as we place ourselves into Jesus so we too will rise with Him. To say it's in the resurrection of the *body* we believe in means the real essential us will be raised to life with Christ.

And the Resurrection of Jesus tells us something about Jesus. The risen One must be the Messiah, God's chosen leader. He is the Glorious Son of God. The One we rightly call "Lord". So his view matters more than my opinion, or yours. He is the Redeemer and we don't need to be little Saviours or lords ourselves. All authority on heaven and earth has been given to our risen Jesus.

Now you don't need to visit the Garden tomb outside Jerusalem to grasp all this. The deep theology of the resurrection is witnessed to in the scriptures. Find yourself a garden and ponder the meaning of the Risen Jesus sometime today. A spot in the sun and a slow reading of Mathew chapter 28 will do the trick.

But it's the third tomb that I visited in Israel that really touched me deeply. This tomb is in a cellar under a house in Nazareth. It is a rolling stone tomb just like the other two I've visited. But the difference was the personal experience of it. We entered the tomb. We sat on the benches where, over the centuries, bodies had been laid. The stone bench was quite cool to touch. Then there was a grinding, and a vibration as the stone was rolled over to close the entry. Suddenly everything was very dark. Just to check I held my hand up in front of my nose and I couldn't see it. My family and I were very quiet and very still. I recall thinking "I'm pretty sure there will be enough oxygen for us for a while."

Then it struck me. This is the real thing. I could push against the stone, but it wouldn't make any difference. I am totally reliant on someone outside deciding that we had spent long enough entombed, and it is time to roll away the stone. It was very real to me that I was totally reliant on being raised, as it were. And yes it is true for us today. We are totally reliant on the reality of Jesus being raised. We are totally reliant on being raised with Jesus.

The real thing about our life is that we need to be raised up with Christ. If we humans could figure out a clever way to raise ourselves and fix humanity, someone would have done it by now. But we can't DIY our lives.

There are times in our lives when we feel we can't go forward or backward, the only way to go is down and up with Christ.

Another thing that struck me about the tomb experience is that we have a reason for hope. Our faith is so much more than "Gee I hope so", or "Wouldn't it be nice if". And our faith is so much more than belief in an after-life and our part in it one the sole basis that we think there is an after-life and we imagine ourselves in it.

At funerals I sometimes hear that Great Grandpa will be on the bowling green in heaven, or that great Grandma will be bossing around St Peter or even God, or that Uncle Fred will be enjoying a cold one with his mates and placing bets on the races. Good Lord deliver us! The God of the risen Jesus is a bit bigger than our domestic imaginations.

No, we Christians have a reason to hope. It is this: as Jesus is raised, so we are raised. We have a reason to hope. And what's more the reign of the risen Jesus starts now. So we are called to live our new life today and every day, this side of death and the other side of death.

The tomb is empty. The stone has been rolled away.

The Risen Jesus is present by His Spirit, so we have reason to cry out Alleluia!