

Mt Albert Baptist Church
Series: Sightings: Jesus in the Old Testament
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Firstfruits and Easter Sunday

Have you ever sat at a funeral and wondered to yourself whether this whole resurrection thing is true?

If you've been in church long enough, you've heard that Christians believe that one day our bodies will rise. One day, we will live life in a new heaven and earth. There's no doubt what Christians believe. So, if you go to a funeral taken by a Christian minister, no doubt there will be mention about the resurrection in a day to come. That one day, we will rise.

You go through a walk through a cemetery and read the tombstones of people who have died.

It's common to read 'Name – Mary Smith; Born 1922. Died 1995. Much loved mother of xyz.' Then there might be a comment 'awaiting resurrection.' Or quotes from Bible verses – "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" "The dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed." "I know my redeemer lives."

Is it all just nice words – or is there a reality? How do we know? It's particularly important when the person laying there is special to you, right? It's particularly important when you think about the likelihood of your own death one day. Chances are that all of us will die – like 100% - so the importance of that question can't be understated. How do we know that one day we will rise?

Sometimes you stumble on tombstones that make you chuckle:

Here's some that bring a smile:
"here lies Les Moore, shot four times with a forty-four.
No Les. No Moore."

'Arthur Spanks
His Wife Katherine
1860 1919"

"Sacred to the memory of my husband,
John Barnes, who died Jan. 3, 1803.
His comely young widow, aged 23, has

Many qualifications of a good wife
And yearns to be comforted."

Sometimes they are pessimistic:

"Traveler, curse me not as your pass,
I am in darkness and I cannot answer you."

A common epitaph on ancient tombs from this era is this simple inscription: "*I was not, I was, I am not, I care not.*"

Maybe we should just laugh off death because it's too hard to think of the reality. Maybe the resurrection idea is just a crutch. How do we know that one day we will rise?

Again, it's an important question. This is about whether we see those we love again – or whether that it. This is about whether there is more to life than what we see around us – whether there is life after this life. How do we know that one day we will rise?

What I want to do today is take us back to feast in the Old Testament times. This feast began 4000 years ago so pretty old. Today, we celebrate Easter Sunday, a day that falls smack bang on the day of this feast that predated Easter by 2000 years. It's called *Firstfruits*.

Over these past few weeks, we've been going through some of the feasts as a church in our series on 'Sightings: Jesus in the Old Testament.' Today's feast is unique for a couple of reasons.

For one, Firstfruits looked forward. As we've seen, most of the feasts look back. They might look back to a time when the people were in slavery in Egypt. It might look back on the harvest that God has given and the way God has provided all they needed over the previous year. It might look back on the sin and shortcomings of the people and the need for a sacrifice to atone for that sin. But, Firstfruits looked forward.

It's also unique in that it was very simple. The other feasts were often quite complex. There were tents to set up. There were particular foods to eat or not eat. All this was dripping with imagery. But, in contrast to all the other feasts, this feast, Firstfruits, is actually a very simple ritual. But, as we'll see later, that simplicity is complete profound in its implications

The feast takes place just days after the feast of *Passover*. We looked at that feast last week – and got a taste for that with the lamb that we all enjoyed afterwards. *Passover* began a weeklong feast called the week of Unleavened bread when the people avoided bread with yeast. During this week, this feast of Firstfruits took place. It's late summer/early spring in Israel, opposite our weather conditions. It was the time that some very early crops just started coming in.

Barley was the first crop to become ripe and ready for harvest in the year, so the beginning of the barley harvest was the beginning of the whole harvest. Barley was one of the two main grains grown by the Israelites. The other was wheat. So, much of their bread and other food was made from barley. Barley was a necessity for their survival.

Here's what we read from Scripture about Firstfruits:

"When you enter the land the LORD your God is giving you as a special possession and you have conquered it and settled there, ² put some of the first produce from each crop you harvest into a basket and bring it to the designated place of worship—the place the LORD your God chooses for his name to be honored.

So, this feast takes place as the first of the barley harvest has come in. Not all of it, just the early to rise barley. Those bits of grain that just grew faster than the others. It's not the main crop. It's just a few pieces here and there. The people were to take that and bring it to the temple.

³ Go to the priest in charge at that time and say to him,

Since, this is what the people said to the priest, let's read this next part together:

'With this gift I acknowledge to the LORD your God that I have entered the land he swore to our ancestors he would give us.'

So, you bring the first bit of the barley and acknowledge you are now in the promised land. In that statement, you're expressing praise to God for bringing you into this land and acknowledging you're obedience to God in bringing the firstfruits, the first of the barley to God.

⁴ The priest will then take the basket from your hand and set it before the altar of the LORD your God.

We read elsewhere that the priest would take the barley from you, lift it up in the air, and wave it before it in front of the veil that separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place. So, symbolically the priest is offering this to God.
⁵ "You must then say in the presence of the LORD your God:

This is like a memorised script about their history that they said at a few occasions like this.

'My ancestor Jacob was a wandering Aramean who went to live as a foreigner in Egypt. His family arrived few in number, but in Egypt they became a large and mighty nation. ⁶ When the Egyptians oppressed and humiliated us by making us their slaves, ⁷ we cried out to the LORD, the God of our ancestors. He heard our cries and saw our hardship, toil, and oppression. ⁸ So the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a strong hand and powerful arm, with overwhelming terror, and with miraculous signs and wonders. ⁹ He brought us to this place and gave us this land flowing with milk and honey! ¹⁰ And now, O LORD, I have brought you the first portion of the harvest you have given me from the ground.'

Then place the produce before the LORD your God, and bow to the ground in worship before him. ¹¹ Afterward you may go and celebrate because of all the good things the LORD your God has given to you and your household. Remember to include the Levites and the foreigners living among you in the celebration. - Deuteronomy 26:1-11 (NLT)

That's it. It's a pretty simple ritual really. Just take the firstfruits of the barley harvest, give them to the priest who waves them in the air before God, say a few words about your history, and bow down in worship.

In that simple ritual, there are actually a couple of profound things going on.

First, the people are praising God for the land he has brought them into and for this barley they now hold in their hand, albeit just a small amount.

But, they're also praising God in anticipation for what is to come. Remember, at this stage, the harvest hasn't all come in – but they are praising God in anticipation of the harvest they're confident is coming. They already have a taste of it. So, they know that it's just a matter of time before the rest of the harvest comes.

Remember, what they are waving is effectively their income. This isn't just some hobby vegetable crop. This barley is about their survival. As they bring the firstfruits to God, they are praising God in anticipation of what was sure to come.

How did the people have confidence that more barley was coming? How was it that they could set their minds at ease that there would be food on the table for the rest of the year? Because they held in their hand the firstfruits. They could see the early part of the harvest. They could taste it. The first of the barley promised that more was coming! They knew it. If in doubt, they just had to look at the first crops. The first of the crops had come in. so more would certainly come!

¹⁴ And if Christ has not been raised, then all our preaching is useless, and your faith is useless. ¹⁵ And we apostles would all be lying about God—for we have said that God raised Christ from the grave. But that can't be true if there is no resurrection of the dead. ¹⁶ And if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised. ¹⁷ And if Christ has not been raised, then your faith is useless and you are still guilty of your sins. ¹⁸ In that case, all who have died believing in Christ are lost! ¹⁹ And if our hope in Christ is only for this life, we are more to be pitied than anyone in the world.

Now all this is incredibly significant when we come to Easter and look at the resurrection. Scripture points back to this feast for the significance of this day.

Now, there was debate at the time of Jesus – and still is today – over the exact timing of this feast of firstfruits. It is all tied up in a phrase –

¹¹ On the day after the Sabbath, the priest will lift it up before the LORD so it may be accepted on your behalf” – Leviticus 23:22

Since, the feast of Firstfruits fell in the feast of unleavened bread which had an additional day of rest, a Sabbath without been on an actual official Sabbath day. There was a difference of opinion as to whether Firstfruits should fall on the day after this rest day, which would be Nisan 16 in the Jewish calendar. Or, whether it was ‘the day after the Sabbath’ – which would be Sunday, since the Jewish Sabbath is a Saturday.

In the year that Jesus died, AD 33, that day of rest – Nisan 16 - and the official Saturday Sabbath, fell on the same day. Whatever side you landed on the debate as a Jewish person, for this year it didn't matter at all. The day of Firstfruits was a Sunday, Nisan 16. The original Easter Sunday falls on this feast of firstfruits. On the very day that the barley would be waved by the priests as the people dedicated the first of their barley crop to God, Scripture says that Jesus rose from the dead.

The timing of that is very, very significant. Listen to these verses in the New Testament. The context of these verses take place in the context of the people asking the question, ‘how can we be sure that there's a resurrection? How can we be sure that one day we'll rise? How can we be sure that we will see our loved ones again in resurrected bodies? Many of them were saying, ‘this is all there is. Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die. Let's just get all we can out of our physical life for this is all that there is.’

Paul teases that out a bit in his response...

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If Christ hasn't been raised, this whole thing is a sham and a waste of time. The words spoken at the funeral or on the tombstone are empty words because there wouldn't be any hope of resurrection.

But, then he responds - *“But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Cor 15:20). (NIV)*

When he uses ‘firstfruits’ he's referring back to this feast. He's referring back to the barley presented by the priest to God. Remember, that barley was given in sure anticipation that the rest of the crop would follow. There would be more coming. This was just the first part of the crop.

Jesus' resurrection, Paul argues, is simply the first resurrection of a large crop of resurrection to come. He goes on . . .

“Christ was raised as the first of the harvest; then all who belong to Christ will be raised when he comes back.” (15:23) - NLT

The Bible says, those who belong to Christ will be raised. Who are they?

² But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God. – John 1;12 (NLT)

²⁷ My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one can snatch them away from me – John 10:27-28 (NLT)

Christians are those who have responded to God's grace. Those who respond to God's grace in simple belief belong to Christ.

What does the Bible say will happen to these people who belong to Christ?

"Christ was raised as the first of the harvest; then all who belong to Christ will be raised when he comes back." (15:23) - NLT

They will be raised again. They are like the rest of the barley grain that takes a bit longer – but it will surely come.

How can we know? Because, Jesus is the firstfruits. The rest of the crop will come – just later. Because Jesus rose, we too are sure to rise.

Paul says, 'if you're unsure about what happens, if you're doubting the truth of preaching, if you're starting to question this whole body-rising-again-one-day-thing – then look at firstfruits. As the people held that first fruit of the barley crop in their hand, the people thanked God in anticipation for the rest of the crop that would come providing them with all they needed for their survival.

He says, 'I want you to look to Jesus, our firstfruits. The one who has risen physically from the dead. His resurrection is the first of several resurrections to come. Since he rose, we can praise God with anticipation that one day we too will surely rise.'

I was thinking about a contemporary image of firstfruits.

Been a gadget man, I immediately thought to the upcoming release of the ipad. I can't wait to see it. Now, I haven't seen one yet – apart from promotional videos online. They aren't released for a few more weeks. But, I don't have any doubt in my mind that they're coming because I've seen a picture of the first release. Because I've heard about that, I'm sure that their will be an ipad in the shop awaiting for me to look at it in a few weeks time. My confidence is even extended because I waited for the iphone to come out and thought it took over a year to come to New Zealand – it eventually came. I was confident that I would see one because I saw the first release pictures.

That's what's happening in the resurrection. Jesus has risen. We read about what happened. The tomb was empty. Over 500 witnesses of the time saw him.

Lives were changed left right and centre, transforming men who ran scared just 3 days earlier to giving their life for this belief. Some were torn apart from beasts in the Colosseum. Some were beheaded. Some were tortured beyond recognition. They lived and died with confident hope. They saw the firstfruits *of the resurrection. Jesus has risen. Because He rose, we too will surely rise.'*

These bodies we have will one day rise just as Jesus' body rose. It doesn't matter what happens to this body. We can be confident that we will physically rise again. Maybe you need some reassurance. Perhaps not so much for you but for the one you love. What if that person died in a tragic death - in an explosion or a drowning at sea – and the body was never found. Maybe he or she was burned beyond recognition. Is God able to rise that body again? Absolutely.

Because Jesus physically rose, we too will physically rise. You can be sure of it.

'Be supremely careful, then, that your soul is in the one, good hand which can still the waves, open the graves, bind up wounds and cancel guilt. Then the dark companion cannot cross the circle which the Saviour has drawn around you. Then your coffin will be your couch on which you will awaken when the morning of resurrection dawns. Then the burial place, whether at home, or on the high seas, or in a distant land, will be a plot where you will sleep as a seed in the eternal sowing of God, to ripen on the day of harvest.

- German theologian Helmut Theilicke

Benjamin Franklin had these words inscribed on his tombstone for this death:

*The Body of B. Franklin,
Printer
Like the Cover of an Old Book,
Its Contents Torn Out
And
Stripped of its Lettering and Gilding,
Lies Here
Food for Worms,
But the Work shall not be Lost,
For it Will as He Believed
Appear Once More
In a New and more Elegant Edition
Revised and Corrected
By the Author.*

So, how do we know? How can we be sure that one day we will rise? How can we know with confidence that we will loved ones that belong to Jesus?

Look to the firstfruits. Look to the first resurrection.

Because He rose, we too will rise.