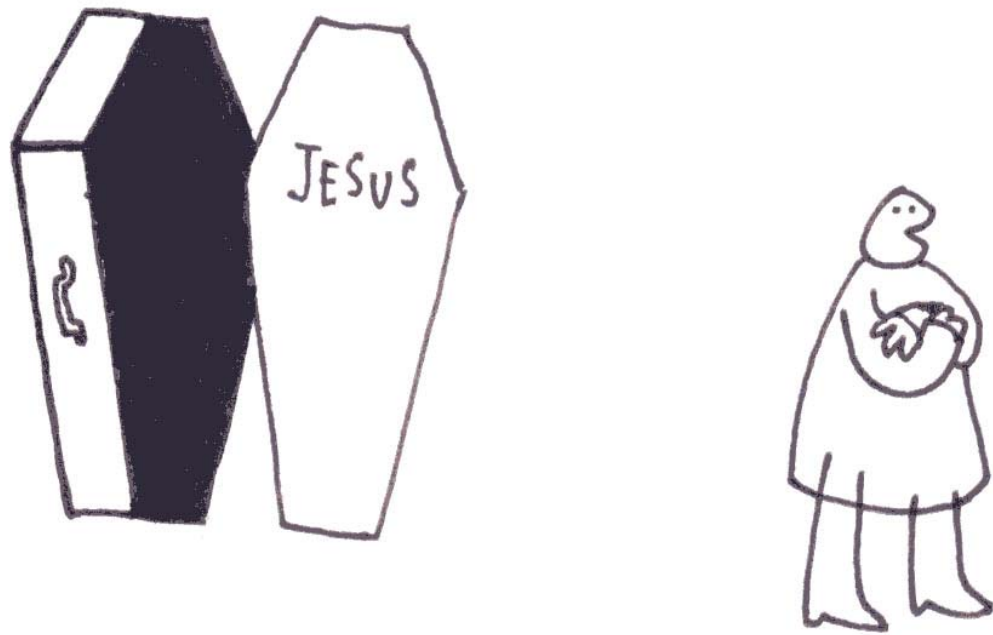


part one

# Is it relevant?

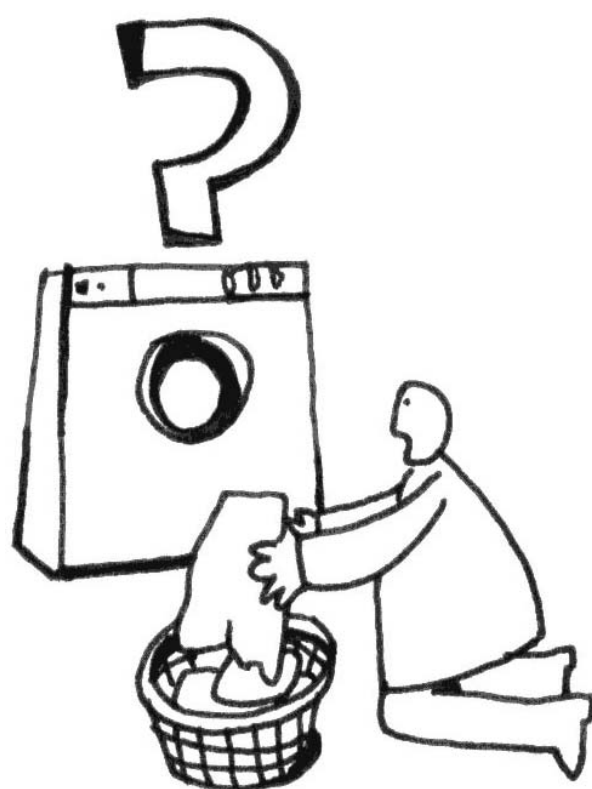


Can Jesus' resurrection help us find answers to the big questions in life?



## 1. Is there anybody out there?

At some point in our lives, all of us begin to ask big questions. When we are waiting for yet another late-running bus, or putting in the umpteenth load of washing for the week, we wonder whether there's more to this life than tedious routine. When a friend's life is turned upside down by accident or illness, we ask



why there's so much suffering in the world. When a relative dies, we ponder what will happen when we die.

These are the sorts of questions we'll be looking at in these first chapters:

- Questions about purpose: what is the point of life?
- Questions about destiny: what happens when we die?
- Questions about suffering: why is there so much in our world?
- Questions about god: does he/she/it exist? If so, what is he/she/it like?

Often, these questions give us a headache if we consider them for too long, so we just press on with life before discovering any answers. Or the bus suddenly turns up, and we forget that the question even began to form in our mind. Sometimes we reject the questions, because we're scared of the answers we might discover. Or we simply give up asking because we're not finding any answers. Life does not always make much sense, and that not only hurts us, but it disappoints us as well. Deep down, we know we would love to find some answers.

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disappoints us as well.**

Is there a key that will help us unlock some answers? My conviction is that Jesus – and in particular, his resurrection – is a key that helps to unlock some answers to life's big questions. At first sight, it's an unlikely-looking key – two thousand years old, and made in a place and culture far removed from our own. Yet the big questions we ask aren't new ones: ever since *homo sapiens*

existed, people have been asking them. So an ancient key from far away shouldn't necessarily be discarded out of hand. Besides, if we really want to unlock some answers to these questions, isn't any key worth trying?

You may not believe that Jesus lived, died or really did come back from the dead – in other words, that the key doesn't even exist! But for the time being, I'd like to invite you to imagine: 'Just suppose that Jesus' resurrection is true . . .' If it helps us make sense of life, it'll certainly be worth investigating the historicity of Jesus' life, death and resurrection – which is what we'll do thoroughly in part 2. In the meantime, let's see if the key fits . . .

### **Searching for the Other**

Have you ever had your breath taken away by nature's beauty? I can vividly remember driving through a mountain range, struggling to keep my eyes on the road, because I desperately wanted to soak in the majesty of the views around! On another occasion, I was overwhelmed when I glimpsed the stunning colours and intricate design of underwater coral. At moments like these, words are deeply inadequate, and even our holiday photos are pale reminders of the experience. We're rendered speechless with awe; our spirits somehow seem to be lifted onto a higher plane. Some people talk about a feeling of the numinous – being filled with a sense of a supernatural presence.

For other people, the experience can be a bit different. For many, holding their new-born child can only be described as 'a miracle' or 'a spiritual moment'. Even those who call themselves agnostics – not sure whether or not there is a god – would agree that it is experiences like these which make them think twice about the supernatural realm.

Opinion polls in the UK report that about 70% of the population believe in a god of some sort or another, but there is increasing uncertainty about what such a god is like. A comedian was once asked what he thought about God. 'I don't know,' he quipped. 'We've never been properly introduced.' Spike Milligan was asked

if he ever prayed. ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘I pray desperately, all the time: get me out of this mess. But I’ve no idea who I’m praying to.’

Despite this uncertainty, interest in ‘spirituality’ is growing fast. In our increasingly frenetic and stressful world, more and more people are recognizing that they need some source for energy and strength in order to cope with life’s demands, and an inner peace to help them relax. Many are looking to alternative or Eastern views of the gods for inspiration. Some look to ‘Mother Earth’. Others look to ‘the god in me’.

But even these spiritualities provide little certainty. Madonna has said that ‘Everyone has their own god’, and that she turns to hers ‘to rise above everyday life and the things that bring you down, and mortality and things like that.’ However, when asked to describe her god more closely, she replied, ‘You know I really have unformed ideas about it because I could change my mind in about half an hour.’<sup>1</sup>

Many of us *think* there is someone out there, and at heart, most of us *hope* that there is, but if we are honest, our best guesses are



still stabs in the dark. Our question remains: Is there anybody out there? If so, what is he/she/it like? Indeed, how can we find out?

### **What if God were one of us?**

Suppose a girl from a rural part of Africa is brought to England on a special trip. She's heard about the Queen, but as she's never had access to a television, she's no idea what the Queen's like. The girl and her guide make their way to Buckingham Palace, with the girl full of questions: 'What's her hair like – is it long and blonde? And how big is she – is she really big?' (After all, in some parts of Africa, it's considered good to be fat.) As they get to Buckingham Palace, she sees one of the Beefeaters standing guard. 'Wow – does the Queen wear a uniform like that, too?' she asks, pointing at their red jackets and tall, furry black hats.

The girl is so excited to be at the Queen's home that she jumps up and down and waves her arms, shouting out to the Queen, trying to encourage her to come out. Eventually, one of the Beefeaters takes pity on her and says, 'I'm sorry, miss, but the Queen's busy at the moment. But you can stand here and have your photo taken with me if you want.' The girl is devastated, and nothing can console her. In fact, she becomes convinced that the Queen doesn't even exist at all – and not even going to the postcard stand and looking at pictures of the Queen persuades her. She and her guide go and feed the ducks in the park instead.

Of course, what that girl really needed was for the Queen to come out onto her balcony and wave at her – or better still, to stroll outside onto the Mall and chat with her, even to go and feed the ducks with her.

Sometimes, we can be like that child, trying to guess what god is like. It can be fun guessing, and our guesses can be very sincere and even strongly-held, but at the end of the day, what we really need is for god (if there is such a thing) to make itself known. If it doesn't do that, it's easy to conclude that god doesn't exist.

The Christian claim is that despite living in heaven, God has come down into the real world, walking and talking with real

humans. God has chosen to make himself known in a way which we can understand. Joan Osborne's famous hit song 'What if God was one of us' asked, 'If God had a name, what would it be? If God had a face, what would it look like?' If we'd been alive in Israel two thousand years ago, we could have seen God face to face in the person of Jesus – and we could have found out what he's like. It's a staggering claim, but what is it about Jesus' life, teaching and resurrection that can substantiate it? Can he satisfy our searching for the Other, providing a permanent point of reference in a swirling sea of best guesses?

**If we'd been alive in Israel two thousand years ago, we could have seen God face to face in the person of Jesus.**

**Jesus' life and teaching gives evidence of a supernatural power**  
 Anyone who reads one of the four earliest surviving biographies of Jesus (known as the 'gospels') will know that Jesus was an extraordinary man, and virtually everyone agrees that he had access to a supernatural power, which was seen in many ways. For example:

*Jesus' teaching.* Jesus' moral, ethical and spiritual teaching left the crowds 'amazed ... because he taught them as one who had authority', unlike the religious experts of his day.<sup>2</sup> Muhammad, Gandhi, the Dalai Lama and all the great spiritual leaders since Jesus have applauded his teaching, and encouraged others to follow it. Even some great non-religious leaders have adopted Jesus' principles.

*Jesus' power to heal.* Doctors today can heal many diseases with the aid of sophisticated medical treatments. By contrast, Jesus healed people with just a touch of the hand or word of command. After one such healing of a paralysed man, who 'got up, took his

mat and walked out in full view of them all', one of Jesus' biographers records that 'this amazed everyone and they praised God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!"'<sup>3</sup> The gospels even record occasions where people who had died were brought back to life at his command. Not surprisingly, 'At this, the [crowds] were completely astonished.'<sup>4</sup>

*Jesus' power over nature.* Meteorologists can sometimes forecast when storms are going to occur, but they cannot stop them happening. In a boat being tossed about on a stormy sea, Jesus told the storm to subside, and it did! The terrified reaction of his fellow-travellers suggest that this wasn't just good timing on Jesus' part. They were prompted to ask each other, 'Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!'<sup>5</sup>

Today, people question such accounts (we'll look at whether they're historically reliable in part 2), but at the time, no-one doubted that this impressive catalogue of miracles actually happened: even those who opposed him admitted as much.<sup>6</sup> They were the first to agree that Jesus had access to a supernatural, divine power.

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However, it is clear that Jesus thought himself to be more than just a man with *access* to a divine power; his words and actions frequently contained an implicit claim that he himself *is* that God. The religious 'experts' of the day (who didn't like Jesus' ministry) were among the first to realize this: on one occasion, they muttered, 'Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?'<sup>7</sup> They knew that Jesus was

claiming to be God, and they could see that his extraordinary actions gave credence to his teaching.

### **Jesus' resurrection prompted people to worship him as God**

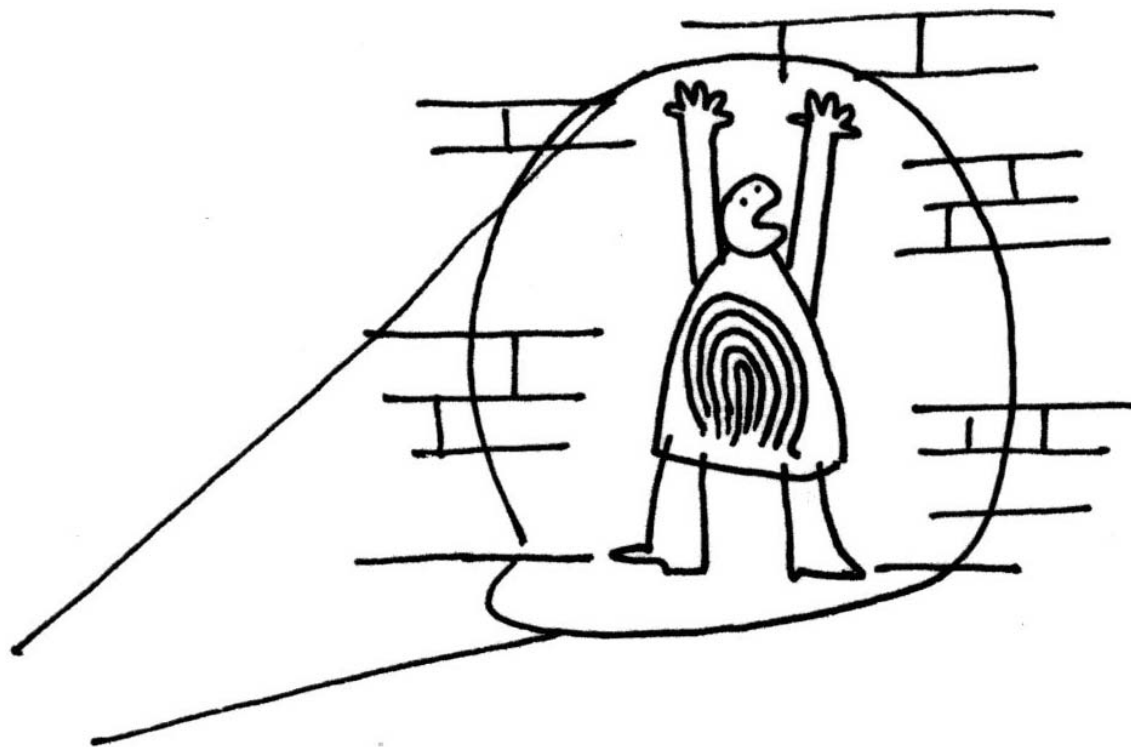
If Jesus' life gives a strong indication that there is *someone* out there, and that *he* claimed to be God, it is his resurrection that substantiates his claim. Who can overcome death? No mere human can. Doctors can sometimes snatch someone back from the very edge of life and death, but if we met someone who'd been declared dead on a Friday afternoon, laid in a mortuary all of Saturday, and had then come back to life on the Sunday morning, the doctors would be freaked, and it would be difficult to treat them as an ordinary human. But if there is a God who created life, then that God could overcome death as well. And if Jesus is that God in human form, we shouldn't be surprised that he rose from the grave.

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death as well.**

It's instructive to look at people's reactions to Jesus after his resurrection. The two women who were the first to see him 'came to him, clasped his feet and worshipped him.'<sup>8</sup> Another of Jesus' close friends, Thomas, had a similar reaction – but only after he'd changed from being a hardened sceptic. For some reason, he hadn't been with Jesus' other friends when Jesus made one of his first resurrection appearances, and so when they later told him they'd seen Jesus alive again, he rubbished their claims, saying, 'Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it.' A week later, he got his chance to do just that: Jesus appeared to

the gathered group again, singled out Thomas and invited him to touch the scars from his execution. Jesus challenged him to ‘Stop doubting and believe.’ Able to touch Jesus physically, Thomas didn’t need much convincing. His reaction was simple but profound – he simply called Jesus, this man he’d known for several years, ‘My Lord and my God.’<sup>9</sup> He realized that Jesus’ unique claims, made in life and apparently wiped out in death, had been gloriously confirmed in his resurrection.

It’s important to realize that these were men and women who, although they firmly believed in God, did not expect God to pitch up in their midst, and wouldn’t have dreamt of worshipping a fellow human. In fact, their whole belief system had to be completely reworked to make room for this assertion that Jesus was God. Understanding this background makes Paul’s bold attestations of Jesus’ divinity all the more remarkable. Initially convinced that Jesus was an evil man, he changed his mind having seen the resurrected Jesus for himself, and wrote that Jesus was ‘declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead.’ Elsewhere, he described Jesus as ‘the image of the invisible God’ and that God ‘was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him,’ saying that Jesus was ‘in very nature God.’<sup>10</sup>



A few months ago, our house was burgled while we were out. The police came round later to look for fingerprints. Fingerprints aren't normally visible to the naked eye, so they scattered a fine powder in likely places, to see if a print would show up. Alas, none did in our case: the burglars presumably wore gloves. The police probably had a good idea of who committed the crime, but what they needed was evidence. You could say that the police were looking for the image of the (now) invisible burglars, but failed.

When Paul described Jesus as 'the image of the invisible God' it's as if he's saying, 'We've got a match! We know exactly what God looks like now, because we've got his fingerprint as evidence!'

### **The guessing games are over**

That means that the days for speculation are over. It seems bold, verging on the arrogant, to speak with certainty about what God is like – unless you have concrete evidence. Jesus' life, death and resurrection give us that concrete evidence we need. If we just had Jesus' astonishing teaching and miracles to go by, we'd conclude that he was a great teacher and healer. If we just had his resurrection to go on, we'd imagine that he was the most

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remarkable medical fluke. But the combination of his extraordinary life and claims, backed up by his unique resurrection from the dead, never to die again, point us to a very different conclusion: that he is God in human flesh. We don't need to guess any more about whether God exists, because he has shown himself

in Jesus. We don't need to guess any more about what God is like, because in Jesus, we can see exactly what he's like.

It's worth exploring God's character briefly, as we see it revealed in Jesus.

- On reading about Jesus' dealings with the sick and bereaved in his day, we discover that God is immensely caring: on many occasions, Jesus was 'deeply moved', 'filled with compassion', or wept when confronted with hurting people.<sup>11</sup>
- We find that God is interested in people no matter what their background or history. Jesus mixed with an extraordinary variety of people (prostitutes, farmers, tax-collectors and political leaders; party-goers and social recluses; Jews, Samaritans and Gentiles), and showed that he was willing to cross social, political, religious and racial boundaries.<sup>12</sup> And although Jesus saw thousands of people as he travelled, he would frequently pick out individuals – those who tried to hide in a crowd as well as those who hid from the crowd – and meet them at their point of need.<sup>13</sup>
- Jesus was particularly radical in his attitude towards women: in a society that viewed them as distinctly second-class, Jesus was not embarrassed to spend time with women and count them among his followers.<sup>14</sup>

In all this, it's clear from the vast crowds that followed Jesus wherever he went that he appealed to ordinary, everyday people. In fact, Jesus was very clear that his target audience wasn't the

**Jesus appealed to ordinary,  
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religious people, it was those who thought themselves beyond the scope of organized religion. I know of one church that

advertises itself as ‘A church for people who don’t go to church’: those are exactly the sort of people Jesus was, and is, after!

### **Is there anybody out there?**

If the Christian claim that Jesus rose from the dead *is* true, then our searching for ‘somebody out there’ can stop, because we will have irrefutable evidence that there is a God. More than that, Jesus teaches us definitively, and shows us clearly, what God is like. We discover that God is wonderfully magnanimous and compassionate. Jesus taught that God created us, loves us, and wants each of us to know God personally, as our ‘Father’. The introduction to John’s biography of Jesus reflects on Jesus’ coming into the world, and concludes, ‘No-one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only [i.e., Jesus], who is at the Father’s side, has made him known.’<sup>15</sup> The implication is clear: because God has revealed himself as a human person, we can get to know him.

However, if Jesus did *not* rise from the dead, we are no better off in our search for the Other – the something or someone which makes sense of those numinous moments. Jesus’ contemporaries may have marvelled in his presence, but if he’s now lying in a grave, he can’t help us find answers to our questions.

# real lives

Addlan comes from China and is doing a science doctorate at the University of Manchester.



## Addlan, how do you know that God exists?

Growing up, I thought that matter and material things were all that existed: I didn't believe in any gods. I believed that things had positive and negative sides and harmony could only be achieved by mixing them properly. However, I felt that my life was lacking something so I started to learn ancient and modern philosophy and even tried to practise Buddhist meditation in order to understand the world around me. My mind was confused and my heart troubled. I needed peace desperately.

After arriving in the UK, I went to a café run by Christians to help international students settle down here, where I made some Christian friends. At first, I didn't believe that someone's life could change simply by accepting Jesus as their saviour. However, I found that Christians were nicer, more peaceful, and very friendly.

As a scientist, I am struck by the beauty of the universe, and think that it must be designed, not random. I learned from my new friends that the Bible says human beings were created by God in his own image, and that God has wisdom and God is love. The fact that there are laws and orders governing this universe and that love exists in human beings, makes me believe that there is a God.

Once I realized that God exists and God loves me, I studied the Bible more and decided to follow Jesus. I know that I have changed

a lot. Before I was a Christian, I was envious, untrusting, judgmental, selfish, complicated and hopeless. But those attitudes were very destructive, hurtful and painful. I worried, I felt desperate, I was lonely and my heart had no rest. However, since I became a Christian, I have become simpler, and I feel released and healed.

# real lives

Tammy is a research scientist and married Andrew in 2004. She lives in Stockport with their cat Treacle and loves running.



## Tammy, why do you believe in God?

By the time I got to university, my priorities were career, sport and living life 'to the full' – God never came into the picture. Following a serious rugby injury, I found myself in hospital, very scared: What if I couldn't walk or play sport? What about my career? Then an authoritative yet loving voice resonated in my very bones. I knew it was God, asking me if I was paying attention. I could have died had the injury been 5 mm further up my spine; the next day, I walked out of hospital knowing I'd been granted a second chance.

Six months later, I went to church and instantly felt that I'd been called home. I met people who wanted to be my friends, helping me sort out my depression and alcoholism, as well as having a laugh together. They looked past my barriers and didn't judge me. I realized that God wasn't out to spoil my fun, but that His 'rules' were there for my protection. I repented of my previous life, and the further I've travelled in my journey with Him the more I've realized that going against Him leads to pain and heartache.

Deep down inside, I know God exists. Some people say that science and Christian faith are incompatible but in my experience both work. Who told the bee how to produce such a mathematically precise honeycomb? Who gave the spider the ability to

produce silk so strong that it's taken scientists years to emulate it? Sunsets look to us as if God has taken His art pallet and used the sky as His canvas. No mathematical equation can describe the awe and beauty of these wonders in nature. Exploring God's world scientifically advances technology but the ultimate answer came when God revealed Himself in Jesus.