



Sermon

Easter Sunday 8th April, 2012

Death could not hold him

Mark 16:1-8; Isaiah 25:6-9

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Introduction

Today is 8th April. On this day in history: Picasso died; Betty Ford was born as were: Ian Smith, Jurgen Moltmann, Larry Norman and Michael Jones – although not all together.

On the 8th April in history - nothing of particular note occurred. Wikipedia notes a list of events which largely seem irrelevant or of no importance except to the immediate participants or only in the same way a butterfly's wingbeat in South America affects us here; it lists 160 births of whom I recognize only the 5 above.

None of those events are worth our while celebrating or observing unless we happen to know the individuals personally. What we do celebrate today is the resurrection of Jesus. And that event does affect us and is worth celebrating.

The Resurrection

It is not just an historical commemoration – although it is good and important to know that it is an historical event. We are not talking about myths, old wives' tales or fables but well-attested historical records. It is far more than mere history to us. The resurrection of Jesus affects my life. And the resurrection affects your life – today and each day.

When I was about 19 I was struggling with questions of faith. I wondered about Jesus and whether he was divine. However, I knew when I took communion that I felt a presence as I gave thanks. I reasoned that there was no significance for me if some ordinary man 2000 years ago whom I had never met said, "Eat bread and drink wine to remember me." So if it did have an impact on me, he must have been as he claimed the Son of God. Now that was not the end of my coming to faith, but I think the logic was correct. This is not a mildly interesting memorial but it is something with continuing and present power.

Last week's themes

This last week, in our services leading up to Easter, we have looked at some of the things Jesus said on the eve of his death. "I am the way, the truth and the life," and "I am the true vine."

Not "I know the way." But "I am the way." I am the way to live. I am the way to the Father – to God. Not, "I know the truth" but "I am the truth." And similarly, I am the life. He had already said, "I have come so that you may have life and have it abundantly." His close follower, John, wrote in his first letter, "He is the true God and eternal life."

Jesus is the true God. Jesus is eternal life. He is eternal life! So is it surprising that death could not hold him?

Death could not hold him

That's how Peter put it when he preached on the Day of Pentecost:

"Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him."¹

This eternal life bursts forth from the grave triumphing over death. In the morning service on Friday, we looked at Matthew's telling of the awesome events that accompanied the crucifixion – the darkness (which was not a solar eclipse), the tearing of the temple curtain when Jesus died and the earthquake which broke open tombs of holy people. Matthew tells us that those people were restored to life.

"The tombs broke open and the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs, and after Jesus' resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many people."²

Matthew didn't put that in his record as a metaphor. He states these dead saints were seen by many people. So too, if it were a false claim, it would be well known in Jerusalem that many people had not seen them.

This is a mystery. We can think of lots of questions about it. Who were they? How were they chosen? What happened to them afterwards? Were they resuscitated like Lazarus or the first fruits of the great resurrection following Jesus? It probably makes most sense to understand that the tombs were broken open at the time of Jesus' death and that after he rose, the bodies were raised to life and those people went into the city and were seen by many.

We don't have to understand everything about it. If we understood all things about God, we would be equal with him – and we are not.

I mention that incident because just as Jesus could not be held by death, so it seems this abundant life of his was spilling out more widely. What a glorious concept!

Consequences

The resurrection means that Jesus' claims are true. He has conquered death. He has been there and returned to us. He calls us to maintain relationship with him. That can only be with a living person. We worship, we follow a living Lord.

It is because he lives, that we know his promise of forgiving our sins is true. It is because he lives that we can have confidence to pray, to listen to him, to seek him, to pray for healing and miracles.

How many of you have had a physical healing? How many have had some experience of God touching your life? How many of you have heard him communicate with you in some way whether through scripture, prophecy, inspired thought or some other way?

He lives!

Thinking of the fullness and duration of this wonderful life, W. B. Hinson, a great preacher of a past generation, spoke from his own experience just before he died. He said,

"I remember a year ago when a doctor told me, 'You have an illness from which you won't recover.' I home and I looked across at that mountain that I love. I looked at the river in which I rejoice, and I looked at the stately trees that are always God's own poetry to my soul. Then in the evening I looked up into the great sky where God was lighting His lamps, and I said, ' I may not see you many more times, but Mountain, I shall be alive when you are gone; and River, I shall be alive when you cease running toward the sea; and Stars, I shall be alive when you have fallen from your sockets in the great down pulling of the material universe! "

We are between the times of the gospel and the Isaiah passage. Jesus has been resurrected. We are still subject to physical death but Isaiah points ahead to the time when the fullness of the Christ's reign will apply on earth. Then death will be finally destroyed. No more death! No more tears! Those who trust Christ will experience the fullness of their salvation.

¹ Acts 2:24-26

² Matthew 27:52-53

The Vine – keep connected

On Thursday, we considered Jesus as the vine. Remember he likens himself to the stem and us to the branches. It is essential for the branches to be connected to the stem to draw sap and so sustenance. So we must remain connected to him.

Let's make sure we keep in the way; that we keep connected. And if that has not been your experience yet - you'll never know until you try. Some people like to say they cannot see or sense God. Why doesn't he show himself? If he allowed us an instantaneous glimpse of his true glory, we would be utterly overwhelmed. But God hides so we have the choice of accepting him. He puts out enough evidence for us to consider. If we seek him, there is more. By hiding he allows us freewill, he honours our freewill. Have you ever played hide and seek with a little child. You want the child to find you so you help them. Meister Eckhart, the 13th century theologian said, "God is like a person who clears his throat while hiding and so gives himself away."

Why Easter? and Alpha

If you are wondering or interested in this life with Jesus, I have two helps available to you. Firstly, some booklets which may help you think it through and secondly, we are about to run an excellent programme called the Alpha Course, which allows you to examine the claims of Christianity in a safe and friendly environment. It runs for 8 weeks on Tuesday evenings, there is a meal together, a DVD presentation and a group discussion where you can air your questions. You can pick up some information on the table by the office window. The taster dinner is 17th April.

So take one of these booklets as you go out if you want one and sign up for Alpha – you won't regret it.