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Sermon

Love Wins

Acts 10:34-43; John 20:1-18

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What was going on through the trial and crucifixion of Jesus? Was it a ghastly end to a well-meaning young man? - another idealist crushed by the political system?

The key is one verse of John's gospel: John 3:16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." The gospel tells of a mission. The Eternal Son of God came to earth on a rescue mission. He came to set mankind free. He came to establish his kingdom on earth. He came because his nature is love.

- When Jesus broke religious taboos by fellowshiping with tax collectors, prostitutes and other sinners, we see him waging war to establish the Kingdom of God. He was conquering evil with love.
- When he lovingly healed and fed people on the Sabbath, he was conquering evil with love.
- When Jesus boldly fellowshiped with and spoke well of Samaritans and Gentiles, and when he touched lepers — he was conquering evil with love.
- When he treated women with dignity and respect, he was conquering evil with love.
- When he healed the ear of the servant who was arresting him — he returned love for evil.
- Through the trial and crucifixion, he consistently returned good for evil, kindness for cruelty. He returned love for evil.
- When he suffered on the cross, he suffered in the place of guilty mankind. He paid the price that we might be forgiven.
- When he died, he died to experience even that for us. He died to rescue us from permanent spiritual death.

But then, after 40 hours, on the third day — then came the events of our reading today. The women had gone to visit the tomb when it was light. Instead of finding it guarded by soldiers as they expected, it was open and abandoned. Dismayed they ran back to find the disciples who ran to the tomb to see what had happened.

John (the other disciple) outran Peter, looked in, but did not enter the tomb. When Peter arrived he (ever the impetuous one) went in and what he saw convinced him that this was not the work of grave robbers but Jesus had returned to life.

What did he see? Verse 6:

“He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen.”

The head cloth was a large handkerchief which was rolled up and tied around the face to hold the jaw closed. We are told that it was not with the other strips but separate. Just as it was when on the body. The strips of linen were around the body, the handkerchief was around the face with the neck separating them. It is worth knowing that the word represented here as *folded up* also means *rolled up*.

Now put those points together. We have a handkerchief which was twisted into a band and tied around the face, it is found rolled up lying separately from the strips of cloth which were around the body. John Stott comments,

"It is not hard to imagine the sight which greeted the eyes of the apostles when they reached the tomb: the stone slab, the collapsed grave clothes, the shell of the head-cloth and the gap between the two. No wonder they 'saw and believed.' A glance at these grave clothes proved the reality, and indicated the nature, of the resurrection. They had been neither touched nor folded nor manipulated by any human being. They were like a discarded chrysalis from which the butterfly has emerged."

When the men had seen the grave clothes they were convinced.

Remember these are eye-witness accounts. The writer of the gospel was one of the two men. The other was Peter, who is quoted in the reading from Acts.

“God raised Jesus from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen--by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.”¹

There are two disciples who saw and believed. They will have more to tell when they meet him later on, but for now they go home knowing that everything has changed.

Mary seems to be too consumed with her grief to realize what had happened. When she looked into the tomb, she saw two angels who spoke to her. They asked her why she is crying. She merely restates her understanding that some people have taken the body. At this it gets really exciting. Jesus came up to her and asked her why she was crying and for whom she was looking.

By the way, when God asks a question it is not because he needs to know the answer. It is to prompt us to think about, believe or declare something. I remember seeking him for an answer about whether we should go to England. One evening, I was journaling in my prayer journal and I believe he asked me five questions. They were very practical questions. I thought through the answers and clarified matters. The next day, the clear call to go to England came through scripture. I wonder if you have experienced that in your relationship with him. If you do hear a question from him, realize the answer is for you to hear.

Full of her grief, Mary still didn't realize who it was, until he spoke to her, “Mary.” Suddenly, she recognized the voice and knew it was he. He was alive again!

Now she had no doubt – everything has changed – “I have seen the Lord!”

John, the gospel writer, has given us three eyewitness accounts here to help us believe. He writes at the end of this chapter (v30):

Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book.³¹ But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

He wrote this document as a straightforward account of the events he had experienced. Let's not wriggle around and think these are made up stories. Peter says in one of his letters,

¹ Acts 10:40-43

“We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eye-witnesses of his majesty.”²

The poet John Updike put the challenge to us in his poem, “Seven Stanzas at Easter.”

Make no mistake: if he rose at all
It was as His body;
If the cell’s dissolution did not reverse, the molecule reknit,
The amino acids rekindle,
The Church will fall.

It was not as the flowers,
Each soft spring recurrent;
It was not as His Spirit in the mouths and fuddled eyes of the
Eleven apostles;
It was as His flesh; ours.

The same hinged thumbs and toes
The same valved heart
That—pierced—died, withered, paused, and then regathered
Out of enduring Might
New strength to enclose.

Let us not mock God with metaphor,
Analogy, sidestepping, transcendence,
Making of the event a parable, a sign painted in the faded
Credulity of earlier ages:
Let us walk through the door.

The stone is rolled back, not papier-mâché,
Not a stone in a story,
But the vast rock of materiality that in the slow grinding of
Time will eclipse for each of us
The wide light of day.

And if we have an angel at the tomb,
Make it a real angel,
Weighty with Max Planck’s quanta, vivid with hair, opaque in
The dawn light, robed in real linen
Spun on a definite loom.

Let us not seek to make it less monstrous,
For our own convenience, our own sense of beauty,
Lest, awakened in one unthinkable hour, we are embarrassed
By the miracle,
And crushed by remonstrance.

Jesus had truly died and had been raised to life again. He plumbed the depths of death and beat it. Love wins!

The author, Frank Peretti, has an illustration to help us understand the victory of the cross.

A family drives along the road with the car windows down. A bee flies in and starts buzzing around inside the car. The young daughter, who is highly allergic to bee stings, cringes in the back seat. If she is stung, she could die within an hour.

² 2 Peter 1:16

The father pulls the car over to a stop, and reaches back to catch the bee. Catching it in his hand, he holds it and takes the inevitable sting. He lets go of it.

The bee is loose in the car again. The little girl again panics, "Daddy, it's going to sting me!"

The father says, "No dear, he's not going to sting you now. Look at my hand." She sees the bee's stinger in his hand.

Likewise, Jesus says to us, "Look at my hands." He has Satan's sting, the sting of death, the sting of sin, the sting of deceit. Jesus has all of those stingers in His hands. When you see that nail-scarred hand, realize that, on your behalf, Jesus took all the pain that Satan could throw at Him. He reduced Satan to a big black bee that's lost its stinger—all Satan can do is buzz. That's the victory that Jesus won for you!

Have you, as Updike put it, walked through the door? Do you know Jesus as the risen Lord? I think we all need to 'hear him speak' to us in some way to believe for ourselves. Otherwise we too will mistake him for someone essentially unimportant. We have been given the evidence, our job is to seek him with all our heart and then we will recognise him too.

"God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

Love wins!