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Sermon

Resurrection

John 20:19-31; Acts 5:27-32

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In November 1982, then Vice President George Bush attended the state funeral of the Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev. Bush was deeply moved by a silent protest carried out by Brezhnev's widow. She stood motionless by the coffin until seconds before it was closed. Then, just as the soldiers touched the lid, Brezhnev's wife performed an act of great courage and hope, a gesture that must surely rank as one of the most profound acts of civil disobedience ever committed: She reached down and made the sign of the cross on her husband's chest. There in the citadel of secular, atheistic power, the wife of the man who had run it all hoped that her husband was wrong. She hoped that there was another life, and that that life was best represented by Jesus who died on the cross, and that the same Jesus might yet have mercy on her husband.¹

Let us fly back in time almost 1950 years to April 33A.D. A group of frightened men have retreated to a hiding place for fear of the authorities. John says for fear of the Jews, but remember every one of them is Jewish including John who wrote this account. He uses the term to mean the Jewish authorities. Why are they afraid?

It is the evening of the Sunday after the crucifixion. There has been some wild tale that Jesus' body has gone from the tomb. Some of the women have told the men that angels had spoken to them saying Jesus was not there anymore. Mary Magdalene even said she had spoken to him. Peter and John have found the body gone with the wrapping left behind like a discarded chrysalis.

It is a dangerous time – it is very likely the authorities will come looking for the men Jesus led and get rid of them too.

So they have locked the door for some safety, and then - on this most surprising of days –Jesus comes and stands in the midst of them. Somehow he has entered or appeared – they don't know yet that is not the chief surprise: he should be dead and here he is solid, healthy and so alive.

He greets them with the normal Jewish greeting, "*Shalom* – peace be with you." Who is this? It looks like Jesus but it can't be. He shows them his hands and his side with the marks of the crucified and the spear thrust which proved he had been dead.

It was He – somehow – alive again. How they rejoiced – their worst nightmare had been turned to something altogether glorious.

¹ Gary Thomas, *Christian Times*, October 3, 1994, p. 26.

John was there; he is recording what he saw because it is vitally important. He was an eyewitness and he has evidence to share. This was no metaphor dreamed up to ease the pain of a brutal execution. John is saying he saw Jesus himself alive, solid, talking and eating. The same John writing in his first epistle puts it like this:

1 John 1:1-3 That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched--this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us.

John is saying, "How solid do you want your evidence?" I tell you about what I have heard, what I seen with my eyes, what I have touched with my hands – eyewitness evidence does not get better than that!

In that gathering that night, Jesus commissions the those disciples. He said,

"Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." ²

He sends the apostles and through them their followers in the same way the Father had sent him: in peace, empowered by the Spirit of God and with authority to forgive sins.

Jesus breathed on them saying "Receive Holy Spirit/breath/wind.' In the Genesis account of the creation of man³, God formed man from the earth and breathed life into him. There are echoes of that first act repeated as these who have now had faith in the Risen Jesus are given new life.

In John 7:38-39 we read,

"Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him." By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive.

Those who believed him later were to receive the Spirit like breath, like a spring of spiritual water welling up from within. This had now happened.

Thomas was missing

In verse 24, John tells us of a significant follow on scene to this. One of the disciples, Thomas the twin, had not been there. When the others told him about meeting Jesus alive again he is forthright and regrets it as nonsense. Maybe he is simply doubting maybe he is angry that they would make up a silly story like that and he will have none of it. In his passionate response, he says,

"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." ⁴

It is a lesson worth noting that Thomas had not been with the others and so he missed out on seeing Jesus. He was isolated and disconnected from his faith community. He had allowed discouraging circumstances to govern his heart response. Thomas had been with Jesus and the other disciples for three years yet he neither believed what Jesus said would happen (that he would be crucified and rise to life again) nor did he believe the evidence of his friends.

We are commanded in Scripture to meet together regularly to worship. It is not an option. We need to do it for our own sake. When we don't we get weaker. We need to be in the community which feeds our faith – all the influences of the world, our flesh and the devil are endeavouring to destroy it. If you choose to immerse yourself in doubt and unbelief – you will grow in doubt and unbelief. If you ignore matters of faith, you will get weaker.

² John 20:21-23

³ Gen 2:7

⁴ V25

If you are offended by God what he hasn't done or what you think he shouldn't have done, it will weaken your ability to believe. In Nazareth, they took offense at Jesus and his preaching and he could do no miracles there except heal a few people⁵ - corporate unbelief is very powerful. In Capernaum, they had some healings like Peter's mother-in-law been healed of a fever, then many more. Their corporate faith grew and in time, Jesus was able to restore Jairus' daughter to life right in their town.

Be careful what you nurture in your heart! One piece of advice which is helpful is thank God for what he has done rather than complaining about what you think he hasn't done.

Thomas, however, did something right – he got amongst the disciples again and it was there a week later that Jesus met him. Once again the doors were locked and again Jesus appears among them. Again, he greets them with "Peace."

What must Thomas have been thinking at this point?

I wonder if anyone of you saw the film "Risen" which was released just before Easter. It is a fictional story of a Roman Centurion given the task of finding the body of Jesus which must have been stolen from the tomb. It is fiction but it portrays well the shock he experiences when he finds the disciples gathered in an upper room and sees there among them the face of the man he had last seen dead on the cross – but now he is alive and looking knowingly at the centurion. What the film does well is allow us to imagine what it would have like to be there.

But to return to the gospel eye-witness account, Jesus turns to Thomas and commands him to test the reality of this body:

"Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." ⁶

This is robust language. Put it in my side – the word 'put' is *ballo* from which we get ballistic. It is to throw, cast, slap. There is a physical scar or hole – Thomas is to deal with all doubt that this is a real, living body of the same man whom he had known and who had been killed a few days before.

Thomas gets it! "My Lord and my God!" - he is now the first to say what it means. Jesus is God and he is Lord.

Now we are taken up into the account. Jesus says to Thomas, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." That's us. If you have believed you are more blessed than the apostles because you have believed without seeing.

Lee Strobel was an atheist journalist whose wife became a Christian. First he swore, then thought of divorce and then decided he needed to help her by showing her the fallacy of Christianity. So he set himself to examine the evidence, especially the evidence for the resurrection. He wrote, "In the end, after I had thoroughly investigated the matter, I reached an unexpected conclusion: it would actually take more faith to maintain my atheism than to become a follower of Jesus."

John concludes by saying that he has chosen a small selection of Jesus' miracles to help us believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing we may have life in his name. That being so, we need to be familiar with these gospel accounts. Have you read one of the gospels right through? It is worthwhile. They were written to be read as a whole, not broken into short sections.

What does this mean for us?

We are given the testimony of the eye witnesses of the time. When we put our trust in Jesus it is not just an intellectual position like: I believe the chemical formula of water is H₂O. It is more like jumping into the swimming pool believing that the water will break your fall and support you.

⁵ Mark 6:5

⁶ John 20:27

When we put our trust in Jesus as Son of God, Saviour, Risen from the dead it changes everything. We come into relationship with God. Our past is washed clean; our future is assured with life that reaches beyond the grave and our present is lived with Jesus available to us.

So what is the outworking of that?

For the disciples we see that they become remarkably bold. Instead of locking themselves in a room to hide, they are preaching in the city. The passage from Acts is set about two months later. They have had such a following that the authorities arrest them and put them in jail. That night, they were released through a miraculous event and they go straight back to public preaching. Again they are arrested. The portion we heard was from Peter's defence which is more of an accusation against the leaders really.

The outworking is a new boldness, a determination to tell people about Jesus, a commitment to obey him in their daily life.

There is an interesting thing Peter says as he asserts they are eyewitnesses:

Acts 5:32 "We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him."

Jesus blew on the disciples and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." Peter says that the Holy Spirit is a witness to these things that is the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus. This is the Spirit given to those who obey him. Surely Peter is saying that for us to have a strong faith in these things we need the presence of the Holy Spirit. He comes to dwell in us and it is **his** witness to the truth of the resurrection which empowers our trust in these things.

On the Alpha course, it is usually at the time of prayer for filling with the Holy Spirit, that people come alive in faith, delight and relationship with Jesus. Why? Because it is the Spirit of God who writes these things on our hearts.

So we need to seek seriously a true faith in Jesus, we need to seek the filling of the Holy Spirit, we need to feed our spirits with the Bible.

What will be our outflow?

There will be a live focussed on the most important person – God whom we know through Jesus. There will be a desire for others to know the love and wonder we have known. We will want to bring things under our influence into agreement with what Jesus wants. We will want to use our time and resources in his service. That is called stewardship.

Some of you attended the Gifts Seminar yesterday. That will have helped clarify the abilities God has put in you which you can use to serve him and others.

Many of you did the stewardship study during Lent. It is about how we manage everything entrusted to us. Our time, our friendships, our talents, our money. We see these things as entrusted to us to manage for Jesus.

Will you think about such stewardship during the coming week? Next week, we will think again about how we need to manage our finances as those who have committed our lives to Jesus.