

Easter Sunday 2022

This is my ninth Easter with the St Paul's family.

Time has flown by.

And I have to say, I look forward to Easter – for me it's the high point of the Christian calendar.

When I was child, it was Christmas.

Easter was a four-day weekend but it didn't have any real meaning for me though I distinctly remember it was about the Easter eggs. To this day I have a soft spot for the marshmallow kind.

That changed when I became a follower of Jesus as a sixteen year old.

I do look forward to Christmas but Easter affects me more deeply.

It captures my heart more.

So for you,

“When did Easter gain significance for you?”

Tell the person next to you.

Is there anyone here who would like to share?

Our passage this morning is from Luke's Gospel - chapter 24 verse 36 – 49:

So by way of context news is beginning to emerge regarding this strange story that Jesus is alive. First the women and now two travellers who return to tell the other believers.

“While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.”

They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost.

He said to them, “Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.”

When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet.

And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, “Do you have anything here to eat?”

They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate it in their presence.

He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms."

Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.

He told them, "This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.

You are witnesses of these things.

I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

When you read the New Testament accounts they are very human stories: there's chaotic scenes, confusion, bewilderment, disbelief, astonishment and absolute joy.

But what I don't about you but what I find at this time of year the sceptics get rolled out by some parts of the media.

I mean, I read two articles in the past week.

And invariably these are people who claim to be part of the Church.

Has anyone noticed that?

And what they say is, "Reece, dead people don't rise."

Yes and that's the point.

Then they cobble a number of theories together but the arguments don't add up.

Have you encountered any arguments against the resurrection?

- "They were delusional and hallucinating" – the simple response to that is show them Jesus' dead body.
- "They had the wrong tomb" –take them to the right tomb and again show them Jesus' dead body.
- "Jesus didn't die but only passed out from blood loss and shock" – well for one, the Romans new what they were doing. Under their watch no one survived a crucifixion. Even if Jesus and became conscious in the tomb, somehow he had to move the stone and overcome the armed guards, in a totally brutalised state and then, still suffering from all these wounds, show himself to the disciples as the Lord of life?

- “It was just a big lie” – the response to that is, not many people are willing to die for what they know is a lie, and it’s incredibly difficult to keep that lie going for an extended period of time:

Chuck Colson, who was involved in the Watergate scandal said:

“I know the resurrection is a fact, and Watergate proved it to me. How? Because 12 men testified they had seen Jesus raised from the dead, then they proclaimed that truth for 40 years, never once denying it. Every one was beaten, tortured, stoned and put in prison. They would not have endured that if it weren't true. Watergate embroiled 12 of the most powerful men in the world – and they couldn't keep a lie for three weeks. You're telling me 12 apostles could keep a lie for 40 years? Absolutely impossible.”

When you do the research you find the resurrection was without precedent – that means it was totally unexpected.

- For one, Jews did believe in the resurrection of the dead but believed it would happen for all people at the “end of the age” (or what we might call the “end of the world”). At that point everyone would be raised as a large scale event. They would point to the prophet Daniel who said, “Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt.”¹
No one though, expected one person would be raised in advance of the rest.
- Alongside this, nobody expected the Messiah to die and so naturally, no one expected the Messiah to rise from the dead. The Messiah was meant to fight God’s victorious battle against wicked unbelievers, rebuild or cleanse the Temple and bring God’s justice to the world. Of course, Jesus didn’t do this and suffered a cruel death.
- They also knew about ‘ghosts’ and ‘spirits’ as we read here. They had language for that. Jesus rising from the dead was so unexpected they assumed what they were seeing was an apparition.

The only real conclusion you can reach is that Jesus rose from the dead as outlined in the Gospels.

This event is the driving force behind the new community of believers.

¹ Daniel 12:2

It explains how a group of people on the lower rung of the social ladder, who had very little to no social influence, who were afraid and absolutely dejected, became world changers.

And yet they didn't do this through sheer conviction alone.

The resurrection comes with a promise – what's the promise?

Well, there is the promise of our resurrection.

It's not stated verbally but Jesus is showing his disciples what it means to have a resurrected body.

Paul called Jesus the "firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep"² and John said when we see him – Jesus – we will be like him.³

In Jesus' resurrection we see continuity and discontinuity between our current existence and the next.

- Jesus retained his identity... and so will we.
- Jesus has a body. Jesus refers to himself as having 'flesh and bones'. Our future is an embodied existence.
- He had the ability to enjoy food without needing it to survive.
- And yet Jesus is able disappear and reappear behind closed and locked doors kilometres away. (We can keep sneaking up on each other for all eternity☺).
- Jesus had a body and tangible experiences but would no longer succumb to the ravages of disease, illness, age or accidents.
- Jesus still has his wounds, which makes people wonder well will we carry our scars with us?

The best answer I've heard is this: Jesus wounds are a reminder of his eternal sacrifice.

Whatever condition of health we are in this morning we will all face the inevitable – death.

Yet if we have trusted in Jesus as Leader and Forgiver then we also we face something more inevitable – a new body freed from the limitations of this world and filled with boundless life and energy.

That's the promise implicit in the Christ's resurrection.

That's good news; we can't ignore it.

² 1 Corinthians 15:20

³ 1 John 3:2

It's also very future.

However, there is an explicit promise in this passage for the *now*.

There's a task and a promise.

Jesus said:

“You are my witnesses... [and] I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”

It was the promise of the Holy Spirit.

It wasn't by sheer conviction that these early disciples were changed people and changed the world.

For the first believers who saw our Risen Lord, they needed help.

And God, he knew that.

I mean, their conviction would be put to the test.

So there is this assurance all throughout the resurrection stories that Jesus wouldn't abandon them but that he would be with them and he would empower and enable them.

So yes, we should have personal conviction – personal conviction is good and right.

Some people do seem to achieve much through the power of their personal conviction.

Let's do this! Let's get it done!

They are powerful individuals... and they are rare.

The rest of us... we need help.

I have this deep conviction that Jesus rose from the dead.

But to put legs on it at times is another story.

So the good news is the promise from our Father extends to today.

You see, the thing is, if you are a follower of Jesus then you are a witness too; you are a witness to what the Risen Lord Jesus has done in your own life.

So the promise is this:

the same Spirit that resided in Jesus and raised Jesus from the dead,

the same Spirit that resided in the early believers made them changed people, is the same Spirit that resides in you.

Jesus, who has risen, will be with you, and you, and you...

The final question is where or perhaps who?

Where is it for you that you need help to give witness to Jesus?

Perhaps it might even be where are your convictions about God being put to the test?

Or who is it that you need the special enabling this morning?

(Don't look at your spouse or parent or child 😊).

As we take communion this morning, take time to pause.

Take some time to praise and give thanks that we serve a living God.

Also take some time to ask again that Jesus would be with you in a fresh way this Easter, to enable and empower.