

Sunday 4th April 2021
Easter Sunday Message
Sermon on John 20:1 – 29
Theme: “In the midst of death, we are in life”
“Jesus is alive!!”
1. Jesus, Then...
2. ...and Now

Introduction:

“In the midst of life, we are in death...”. How many times have I said these words!! They are part of the traditional words that are used when a person is buried (*e.g., the recent burial of Roma Hector*). The pastor says:

“In the midst of life, we are in death.

From whom may we seek for help, but from you, Lord God, though you are justly displeased because of our sins”.

Death is all around us. Death happens every day. A lot of things have reminded me of this in recent times. We have had here recently the funerals of two older members of our church family: Paul Freund and Roma Hector. Then we hear again and again of the death of people who we have known in the past (*e.g. the visit of friends from Grovedale who shared about the death of people in the church family there who we know and love*). It is sad when you hear about the sudden death of someone you know, and you are reminded in that instant that death can happen to any of us, any time: that “in the midst of life, we are in death”....

Part 1: “Jesus Then...”

But I want to shout out this morning, *this Easter Sunday morning*, in the face of death, and the despair that death brings, that “Jesus is alive!!”

“In the midst of death, we are in life”....

There is life! There is resurrection!

Jesus was raised from the dead on that first Easter Sunday, and so we will be.

How do I know this? From the testimonies of those who saw Jesus alive again on that first Easter Sunday and afterwards. Their testimonies are embedded in the gospel accounts of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Can I share with you this morning the testimonies of three of these witnesses: Mary Magdalene, Peter, and Thomas.... I haven't actually got a copy of their testimonies, but John and the other gospel writers give enough of the details of what happened for me to give you a rough outline of their testimonies:

1) **Mary Magdalene**

“Can I share with you what I saw on that first Easter Sunday.... I told John everything that I saw, and he later wrote it down in his Gospel.

Well, here goes:

I set out early on that Sunday morning from my home in Bethany, with my friend Mary and her husband Clopas, to meet with our friend Salome at John's house in Jerusalem. We took ointments with, *in order to anoint Jesus' body* (Luke 23:56: 24:1; Mark 16:1; cf. “we” in John 20:2; John Wenham, *Easter Enigma*, p. 22-33, 81-84).

We women then left John's house and went to the tomb. When we got there, the stone was rolled away. I went running back to John's house, and told John and Peter what I had seen. They ran off to the tomb to see for themselves, and I followed slowly behind, my eyes full of tears. I was still crying when I got back there. I looked in the tomb again, and, would you believe it, I saw two angels there. They asked me why I was crying, and I told them that I was crying because they

had taken “my Lord” away, and I didn’t know where he was.

Then I turned around and I saw someone, who I thought was the gardener. My eyes were quite filled with tears, and it was pretty hard to see clearly. He said to me, “Woman, why are you crying?” “Who is it that you are looking for?” And I said, “If you took him away, sir, tell me where you have put him, and I will go and get him”.

I’ll never forget what happened next. He said to me, “Mary!”. I’d recognise that way of saying my name anywhere. It was Jesus! I said to him, “Rabboni!”, *which means “Teacher”*. I didn’t know how it could be possible at the time, but what I did know was the Jesus was alive again. Praise God! I saw Jesus alive again many, many times after that *before he ascended to heaven*, and I can tell you, that Jesus isn’t dead, but he’s alive!!

2) Peter

“Can I share with you the greatest moment in my life? But before I do that let me share with you about a couple of the worst times in my life.

You probably know about them, though, from what the gospel writers have written about me.

Let me tell you what happened to me:

When Jesus was arrested, John and I were the only one who stayed in Jerusalem to watch what would happen to Jesus. All the other disciples fled. They ran away, to get away from possibly being arrested, like Jesus (Mark 14:50, 54; John 18:15).

But I ended up doing something worse that Thursday night. I ended up denying three times that I even knew

Jesus, to people who asked me whether I was a disciple of Jesus. I can't tell you how miserable I felt that night, and then on the following day when Jesus was crucified on that cross. I tried to tell God how sorry I was for what I had done, but I still felt overwhelmingly guilty, and I was overcome with grief over Jesus' death.

But then, on that Sunday morning, something wonderful happened....

Early on that Sunday morning after Jesus had died and been placed in a tomb, Mary Magdalene came running to John's house where I was staying, and she was yelling out that someone had taken Jesus' body from the tomb, and that she and the women didn't know where the body was.

John and I ran to the tomb, and I got there first. I rushed in, and I saw the linen cloths that had been used to wrap Jesus' body in, lying there, and no body. John and I then went back home, and later Mary came sharing a strange tale about Jesus being alive. But I didn't know what to think!

Later on, on the day, I was out on my own praying, and asking God to forgive me for denying that I knew Jesus. I had done a lot of praying in those couple of days since Jesus' death. Then suddenly, Jesus was there in front of me. I haven't said a lot about this to anyone. It was the most special time for me. Jesus reached out and picked me up, and said to me, "God forgives you, Peter, and I forgive you". (*John 20:1-10; Luke 24:34; 1 Cor.15:5*).

That was the greatest moment of life: seeing Jesus alive again, and hearing him forgive me and assure me of God's forgiveness. I saw Jesus again that night in

the upper room of Mark's house there in Jerusalem. We had the doors locked to keep out anyone who might want to arrest us. And then suddenly, Jesus appeared in the midst of us...

(Luke 24:36-49; John 20:19-23).

So I saw Jesus again that night and after that again and again for about six weeks, before he ascended to the Father. Before he went, he assured us that he would be with us always, to the end of the age *(Matt. 28:20)*.

Yes, Jesus is alive!! God raised him from the dead!!
(cf. Acts 10:40).

3) Thomas

"Well, Peter and Mary have told you about the times when they saw the risen Lord. Let me tell you about the first time when I saw him:

I didn't see Jesus when he first appeared to the other disciples on that first Sunday night. And, to tell you the truth, I didn't believe them when they said that they had seen Jesus alive again! I told them that the only way I'd believe *that Jesus was alive again* would be having Jesus alive before me, and me being able to touch him and put my finger in the nail holes in his hands, and my hand in his side where the spear went.

And guess what!? That's what happened on the following Sunday night! The doors were locked, but that didn't keep Jesus away. Jesus suddenly appeared in front of us, and he had me touch him. I touched the scars in his hands, and I put my hand into the scar in his side, *where the spear had pierced his side*. I fell down before him, and I said to him in awe, "My Lord and my God".

I tell you that Jesus was raised to life by God. I have

seen him and touched him, and I know it to be true.

These aren't the only witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus, 'not by a long chalk'.

Paul in his letter to the Christians in Corinth gives us a summary of the male witnesses, *who could give their testimony in court*. He writes:

I passed on to you what I received, which is of the greatest importance: that Christ died for our sins, as written in the Scriptures; that he was buried and that he was raised to life three days later, as written in the Scriptures; that he appeared to Peter, and then to all twelve apostles. Then he appeared to more than five hundred of his followers at once, most of whom are still alive, although some have died. Then he appeared to James, and afterwards to all the apostles. Last of all he appeared also to me...

(1 Cor. 15:3-8).

And Luke tells us in his second volume, *in the book of Acts*: **For forty days after his day, Jesus appeared to them, to the men he had chosen as his apostles, many times in ways that proved beyond doubt that he was alive. They saw him, and he talked with them about the Kingdom of God (Acts 1:3).**

And this is only a fraction of the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus.... There's also the empty tomb itself, the very existence of the Church, the willingness of the witnesses of the resurrection to suffer and to die for what they had seen, the change of worship day from Saturday to Sunday, the Lord's Supper, Baptism, and so on.

Part 2: “Jesus Now..”

Jesus is alive!! God raised Jesus from the dead! And that changes completely the way that we can look at death *now*.

Have I told you the story of how the Cape of Good Hope at the bottom of Africa, got its name? In the late Middle Ages, it used to be called the Cape of Storms. Why? Because no ship from Europe had gone around it, without getting wrecked. People in Europe in the late Middle Ages wondered what lay beyond the cape at the bottom of Africa. But they didn't know....

Not at least until the famous sailor Vasco Da Gama made the journey. Then the people in Europe knew that the cape was the gateway to rich lands of spice in India and China. Then the name of that terrible cape was changed from the Cape of Storms to the Cape of Good Hope. And all thanks to Vasco Da Gama....

You know, up until the time that Jesus died and rose again, “death” was like the Cape of Storms. Until Jesus' successful rounding of that cape *and his return*, people could only largely guess about what lies beyond death. They didn't know for sure. But now we do!

Now we know that death isn't the end! Now we know that just as Jesus was raised from the dead, so we too, *who trust in Jesus as our Saviour*, will be raised from death. As Paul puts it in that great resurrection chapter of his letter to the Christians in Corinth:

But the truth is that Christ has been raised from death, as the guarantee that those who sleep in death will also be raised (1 Cor. 15:20).

Conclusion:

The traditional funeral order has it that: “In the midst of life, we are in death”. And that's true! Reminders of our mortality are all around us, and every funeral is a reminder that one day each of us will die....

But equally true is the converse, that: “In the midst of death, we are in life”, *there is life!* Jesus is alive! God raised Jesus from the dead, and in the same way, at the Last Day, God will raise us who trust in Jesus as our Saviour from the dead, *and take us home to be with Him forever.*

Death won't have the last say! I will see Paul Freund and Roma Hector again, and Martin and Irene Edwards and Roger and Diane Byrne, and Pat Traeger and Jeanette Hensel and the list goes on and on.... And I will see my Mum and my Nana and my great Aunts....

We will see all those who have gone before us, and all those who come after us, all those who are God's forgiven children through their baptism and their faith (*e.g., our sons, and their children, and their children as so on*).

Easter Sunday is a great reminder to us that we need not fear death, that “in the midst of death...*there is life!*”