

## Sermon Easter Sunday 2024

### Acts 10:34-43 Mark 16:1-8

I want to firstly refer to the passage from Acts, the address Peter gives in the home of Cornelius, a Roman army officer. He makes the point that he and the apostles were witnesses, not only to what Jesus did during his short ministry, but also to his resurrection. *'We are witnesses to all that he did...God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear to us who were chosen by God to be his witnesses.'* Witnesses are essential in the demonstrating of truth. It is virtually impossible to convict someone in court without witnesses. So, we have the testimony of Peter, and indeed other disciples, to the risen Christ.

Then there is the evidence of the empty tomb, as discovered by the women. Initially, according to Mark's account, they were so frightened that they told no one but you can't keep something like that to yourself for long, and so they soon told Peter and the others. As we read in Luke's and John's gospels, Peter himself ran to the tomb to see for himself that Jesus had indeed gone.

It is interesting that it was the women who discovered the empty tomb. It actually cements the authenticity of the story. In those days the word of women was not deemed to be very reliable. Unfortunately, that's the way it was. So, if you were wanting to make up a story about the resurrection, you certainly wouldn't ascribe the discovery to women, because they just weren't considered to be reliable, and their testimony would not be accepted. I want to come back to this issue of evidence in a moment.

One of the most interesting points in Mark's account is that the angel tells the women to go and give the message to the disciples, including Peter. He actually names Peter, the only one he names. Why would he do that? Well, as we know, not long before Jesus died, Peter denied having anything to do with him. It was more than likely the last time Peter saw Jesus before his death. There is no record of him being present at the crucifixion. I think it is a message of forgiveness to Peter. It is Jesus' way of saying to Peter, 'It's ok. You are very important to me. I am still going to need you to build my church.'

It is a message to all of us. Every single one of us metaphorically denies Jesus at times through what we do or say. But we are forgiven. Jesus still loves us and still needs us to continue to build his church. Despite our weaknesses, we all have a role to play, every single one of us.

I think it is important to understand that the Resurrection is about transformation and new beginnings. There is the story of the elderly couple who were visiting Israel on holiday when the wife fell ill and died. The husband went to the local undertaker to arrange the funeral. 'How much will it cost?' he asked. 'Well,' said the undertaker, 'that depends. We could do you a lovely funeral here in Israel and it really won't cost you much. But if you want to have your wife's body flown home for the funeral, it will be very expensive. It's up to you.'

The man thought about it for a moment and then said, 'I think I'd better pay to have her body flown home. You see, I remember reading about some guy who died here in Israel some time ago. He was buried and three days later he came to life again, and I ain't taking any chances!'

But the man had it wrong. Easter is not about revival, as though Jesus was raised from the dead and just carried on from where he had left off. There is a transformation, for Jesus himself and more importantly, for us. It is about new beginnings. It is about the beginning of a new understanding, a new relationship with God, and closely aligned with that, the beginning of our religion, our church itself. How has that come about?

During his three years of ministry, Jesus did and said some remarkable things – his teaching, his healing and miracles. By raising Jesus from the dead, God authenticates all those things and just who Jesus was.

Timothy Keller, theologian and preacher, wrote, *'If Jesus rose from the dead, then you have to accept all that he said. The issue on which everything hangs is not whether or not you like his teaching but whether or not he rose from the dead.'* Well, central to our faith is the belief that he indeed did rise from the dead, and there is considerable proof of that.

The point is this, only God could walk away from that death and bring about the change that then unfolded. That's why we have our Christian religion today – because in that one breath-taking and transformative event, Jesus showed us that he was indeed from God. So, our understanding and our worship of God takes on a whole new life, a whole new shape and pattern. It becomes a model that acknowledges and embraces Jesus as God, and so our Christian religion is born.

John MacArthur, American broadcaster and author, said, *'The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the single greatest event in the history of the world. It is so foundational to Christianity that no one who denies it can be a true Christian.'*

On a purely personal level, the Resurrection is meaningful for us in that the real evidence of the Resurrection lies with our personal experience and how our faith shapes and gives us security and hope as we move forward in our lives. You could say, that in death the best is yet to come. Let me share a story with you.

There was a woman who had been diagnosed with a terminal illness and had been given three months to live. She met with her minister to finalise arrangements for her funeral. Everything was in order and then the woman said, 'There's one more thing. I want to be buried with a fork in my hand.'

The woman explained. 'In all my years of attending church socials and potluck dinners, I always remember that when the dishes of the main course had been cleared away, someone would inevitably lean over and say, "Keep your fork." It was my favourite part because I knew that something better was coming, like rich chocolate cake. So, I just want people to see me there in the casket with a fork in my hand and I want them to wonder, What's with the fork? Then I want you to tell them, "Keep your fork. The best is yet to come."'

The minister's eyes welled up as he hugged the woman. He knew that she understood so very well that death leads to a new beginning.

*'And the one sitting on the throne said, "Look, I am making all things new!"'* Revelation 21:5 .

We know that in life we grow through the pain we experience. That dictum is so very and apparent at Easter. From the pain of Good Friday a new life grows. It is a new understanding of God, a new relationship with God, a new hope, a new future. As we celebrate today, let's resolve to move forward with renewed vigour and commitment, because the best is yet to come.

I want to finish with a short observation. In the time of Jesus, the cross was a symbol of suffering and death. Jesus transformed the cross into a symbol of life, hope and love.