

Easter Message

Luke 24:11; 1 Corinthians 15:17-19; Colossians 3:1-4

Everton Hills

16 April 2017

Jesus is risen. He is risen indeed.

Those seven words are what the entire Christian faith rises and falls on. If they are true, then what we are celebrating today is something of incredible significance. It means the greatest barrier to life, death, is a barrier no more. And that demands a response... like the greatest victory you may experience, the personal defeat of a cancer, or a relationship restored, to celebrate the end of the final curse of death, warrants a response of profound joy and enthusiasm...

Jesus is risen. He is risen indeed.

Of course, if it is not true, if Jesus didn't really rise from the dead, then we have been caught up in one of the greatest hoaxes of human history. Indeed, the apostle Paul says...

"And if Christ has not been raised, then your faith is useless and you are still guilty of your sins. In that case, all who have died believing in Christ are lost! And if our hope in Christ is only for this life, we are more to be pitied than anyone in the world." (1 Corinthians 15:17–19, NLT)

Jesus is risen. He is risen indeed.

So today, where do you stand on that declaration. What do you really believe? And how will you respond to it.

That first Easter morning, none of Jesus' disciples were really expecting Him to rise from the dead. For them, this was the saddest moment of their life. The person they had hung out with for three years, the person they had come to respect and love, the person who spoke about justice and new beginnings, the person who performed miracles – even turning water into wine, was dead.

Some women, had come back with a fanciful story. They had gone early in the morning to the tomb, to pay their final respects, and had returned with claims that were unbelievable... the tomb was empty. What's more, they claimed that a couple of angels that Jesus had been raised from the dead.

Being raised from the dead just didn't happen. That's how the disciples made sense of it... Indeed, Luke records that ***"the story sounded like nonsense to the men, so they didn't believe it."*** (Luke 24:11, NLT)

So if you find this story of Jesus being raised from the dead a bit nonsensical... you are in good company.

So what does history tell us?

Firstly, history tells that Jesus was known to be wise and virtuous, and to perform miracles... The Jewish Historian Josephus, who wrote shortly after Jesus' death, said, ***"At this time there was a wise man named Jesus. His conduct was good, and [he] was known to be virtuous."*** And the 2nd century philosopher, Celsus, who was a fierce opponent of Christianity, noted that Jesus had acquired certain powers that ***'on the strength of them gave himself out to be a god'***.

What we know is that was real and that he existed, and that he was both virtuous and miraculous.

What we also know is that when he died, there was massive earthquake. Thallus, an historian from around Jesus' time is recorded to have noted that at the time of Jesus' crucifixion **"On the whole world there pressed a most fearful darkness; and the rocks were rent by an earthquake, and many places in Judea and other districts were thrown down."**

What we know is that when Jesus died the whole world seemed to fall into chaos.

And regarding the resurrection, both Josephus (of whom I spoke about earlier) and Pliny the Younger (who lived around 61AD) note that there were people who believed with a passion that Jesus rose from the dead, other ancient historians, like Suetonius and Tacitus recorded that these followers were even prepared to die for that belief!

What we know is that something incredibly profound had touched the lives of those early followers, that their hope was stronger than their fear of death.

So what does all of that say to us, this Easter morning? While it speaks of the evidence of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, it doesn't really say much about how this impacts me today.

And what I want you to understand, is that while the historical evidence is strong, when we declare **"Jesus is risen. He is risen indeed"** what we are saying is something more than reactive liturgical response.

What we are saying is that **Jesus' resurrection has impacted ME**. It has changed me. It has transformed me. It has given me an inner peace that human logic and reason cannot explain!

In the lead up to the bible reading we heard before, Paul tells the Christians in Colossae not to be dissuaded by fancy thinking...

"Don't let anyone capture you with empty philosophies and high-sounding nonsense that come from human thinking and from the spiritual powers of this world, rather than from Christ."
(Colossians 2:8, NLT)

And he tells them not to feel condemned because of humanly imposed religious rules...

"So don't let anyone condemn you for what you eat or drink, or for not celebrating certain holy days or new moon ceremonies or Sabbaths.... So why do you keep on following the rules of the world, such as, "Don't handle! Don't taste! Don't touch!"? Such rules are mere human teachings about things that deteriorate as we use them. These rules may seem wise because they require strong devotion, pious self-denial, and severe bodily discipline. But they provide no help in conquering a person's evil desires." (Colossians 2:16, 21-23, NLT)

Because, Paul says,

"You have died with Christ, and he has set you free from the spiritual powers of this world... (So) Since you have been raised to new life with Christ, set your sights on the realities of heaven."
(Colossians 3:1, NLT)

Christ is risen. He is risen indeed.

What Paul is saying, and this is why we need to think about ourselves as Easter people, is that because of Jesus' death and resurrection, our resurrection has begun! Because of what happened in that tomb, and through baptism has happened to us, our selfish and destructive actions and reactions no longer need to control us.

When we say Christ is Risen, He is Risen Indeed, we are saying that something compelling has happened in my life, and is transforming me from the inside out.

To know that death did not defeat Jesus, is to know that my greatest problems do not need to defeat me today.

To know that death did not defeat Jesus, is to know that my selfishness does not need to control me today.

To know that death did not defeat Jesus, is to know that the fears and the resentments that I carry, need not have power over me – indeed, I can bury them in the grave today.

To know that death did not defeat Jesus, is to know that instead of wallowing in my own self-loathing or self-pity, I can taste and celebrate God's grace for me – because I know that Christ is Risen, He is Risen Indeed.

May this Easter Day be a day where you celebrate God's love and his grace, to the extent that it gives that joy that passes all human understanding... a joy for this life and the next.