

SERMON - 01/04/18
EASTER DAY (ST JAMES')

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

Focus of text: Our new life in Christ

Aim of sermon: To encourage people to trust God more and see in death an invitation to life.

Response: A desire for and commitment to the life God gives us in Christ's resurrection.

Title of sermon: Beyond the tomb.

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Living Christ, as your tomb was laid open on that first Easter morning, so may your word be laid open to us in this sermon time and may we know your presence with us to bring us life. Amen.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! (Wait for the response)

Today we celebrate the greatest single event in human history - the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. This was no mere resuscitation. Christ rose in glory never to die again. This event gives a new meaning to human life. It gives us a new destination and a goal. Our final goal is life, not death. Our citizenship is in heaven with Christ, our risen Lord.

I guess we are all familiar with expressions that define the boundaries of human life, such as "from the cradle to the grave", "from the womb to the tomb".

Today we celebrate the decisive event in human history that freed us from these limitations.

Our lives are no longer bounded by the tomb.

Life awaits us beyond the tomb, because, by sharing in Christ's life and death, we also share in his resurrection.

In Christ, we also will be brought to glorious life by God.

Easter has been called the eighth day of creation, because on that first Easter day, God gave to all humanity the gift of abundant, eternal, resurrection life - life lived in the heart of God's love and favour.

Before that, death had the final word.

Whatever goodness and beauty there was in human life was inevitably ended by death.

But with Jesus' resurrection came the confidence that all who put their faith in Christ will rise with him to eternal life.

And not just those who have lived since the time of Christ, but even the dead in their graves.

Through this single event - the resurrection of Christ - God brought life to dead people of all ages.

No defeat, no difficulty, not even death itself, can overcome the life that God has given to us in Christ.

So with the resurrection there is tremendous hope.

Hope in God's love, which brings us to life, just as it brought God's Son, Jesus Christ, to life.

This hope is not based on what we can do, or manage to organise for ourselves.

It's not based on the immortality of our own souls, as if eternal life was ours by right.

We depend on God.

Without God's love we are dead.

"Without God nothing", as the saying goes.

But in the orbit of God's loving power, anything is possible.

Although Jesus was God in human form, he still put all his hope and trust in God the Father.

He showed the ultimate dependence on God, and the ultimate obedience to God as he willingly went, defenceless, to the cross.

And it is this very dependence and obedience that led to his exaltation.

As St Paul says, "he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore, God also highly exalted him...."

Jesus was raised to glorious life, precisely because he trusted not in himself, but in God the Father.

Those who mocked Jesus on the cross said, "He trusted that God would deliver him. Let God deliver him, if he delights in him."

And God did deliver him mightily from death into life through the glorious resurrection.

Our hope is in God.

God is the one who will bring us to life.

But this life from God is not only a hope for the future.

It is freely offered to us now.

The early theologians used to say that the Father sent Jesus to our world to remind us what a human being was like.

We had become only half alive - a sad degeneration of God's original plan.

We needed Jesus to come so that we could regain a vision of what it means to be truly alive.

The Bible teaches us that death was not God's original plan for human beings - that in fact, God created us for life, but that we chose death in disobedience.

Like the first disciples, we still tend to think of the tomb as the natural end to human life.

But it is not.

God means us to live.

Human beings find this hard to take in.

We find it hard to grasp the truth that with God all things are possible, and that resurrection can take place now.

What is it in us that finds it hard to accept the joy of Christ's resurrection and our own?

What keeps us from moving beyond the tomb?

One reason, I think, is that we hate to be disappointed.

We don't want the shame of believing what is not true.

It seems almost too good to be true that God can bring life out of death, and not only life but the glory of Christ's resurrection and ours.

People feel shamed by believing what is not true. They would rather be cynical and unbelieving, than be thought of as naïve and gullible. "Don't hope for anything and you won't be disappointed", says the cynical voice. So instead of facing the risk and embarrassment of faith, people accept limitation.

What would it cost you to believe that your greatest wound could be healed? The wound of disappointment, or of shattered relationships, the wound of abuse, or sickness or of sadness? What would it cost you to believe that you could be healed of such wounds?

To reach out to the fullness of life involves great risks. For many people the grim certainties they can rely on seem better than the good news that they can't be sure of. To live again is costly, because it requires the loss of our securities, our certainty. People will accept a tomb, accept death, as long as it's predictable - and, let's face it, nothing is as predictable as death. But God is and ever will be a God of surprises, doing the unexpected, making the impossible possible.

I once wished someone a new year full of good surprises and she said to me, "Oh no thank you, I don't like surprises. That was a funny remark, but there also seemed something wrong about it.

She was a Christian and good surprises are the way that God operates. That's the sign of God at work in our world. Are we willing to trust ourselves to a surprising God of life?

Another reason that people find Christ's resurrection hard to accept is the fact that it moves us beyond being in control of our own lives, to radical dependence on God. We are utterly dependent on God for resurrection life. "What would life with God be like?", some wonder, dependent as it is on God's will. We might find that God's will is for us to die in some way, just as Jesus died on the cross after praying "Your will be done." Wouldn't it be better to live the life we choose here on earth, some feel, than to live the life someone else chooses for us - even if its destination is heaven? But God knows that there are some deaths that free us to live. Deaths to our own self-protective ways of doing things will open us to new life in God.

The tomb is a symbol of those who try to save their life, but instead they lose it, they narrow it down until it is a form of death. A tomb is solid and material and reliable – but dead. In contrast with that image, an egg looks like a tomb. It's hard on the outside. But inside it is full of life that is waiting to burst out.

That's why the egg is such a good symbol for Easter.
It is filled with life that is waiting to emerge.

And so today we have a chance to celebrate life – the life that God gives.

But not only that, we also have a chance to choose the life that God gives to all people through Christ.

A long time ago there was an ad on New Zealand television, and the by-line went: “today is the first day of the rest of your life.”

If today you choose Jesus – his life, his death and his resurrection – then today is the first day of the rest of your life.

Today is the first day of the rest of your life in Jesus, and that life is eternal and glorious.

Let us pray:

Christ, you are risen from the dead.

We are risen with you.

May our life never deny this eternal life,
this peace and hope and joy.

Praise and glory to the God of life
who is stronger than all kinds of death.

Amen.