

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

Easter Sunday

Presented by Graham Agnew

Introduction

Three guys were talking at a barbecue when the conversation strangely came around to the subject of death and dying.

“What would you like said at your funeral?” one asked.

The first guy said: “I’d like someone to say, he was a great humanitarian, who did a lot for his community”.

The second guy said: “I’d like it said, he was a wonderful family man who set a great example for us all.”

The third guy paused for a moment and said: “I’d like someone to say, look, he’s moving!”

The drive to survive – to keep on living is strong in everyone who’s of sound mind! Death is something people just don’t want to think about.

Christianity is unique among the world’s religions in that we believe our founder, our leader has returned from death. And because Jesus has come back from death, the fear of death need no longer be a problem, for those who follow Him. Today, Easter Sunday, is the day we focus on the reality of our Lord’s resurrection in a special way! Today is the day to pull all the stops out!

Part One

The historical evidence for the resurrection is very strong but ultimately we accept this reality by faith. A reporter once asked William Barclay, the great Bible commentator of the 20th century: “Dr Barclay, you’re a man of great learning – do you really believe Jesus Christ is alive today?”

“Alive!” Dr Barclay answered: “Of course He’s alive; I spoke with him this morning!” Belief in the living presence of Jesus Christ in the world today comes down to a step of faith.

But this step of faith is not some vague, mythical, “wish upon a star” kind of belief – it’s a step involving our mind, our emotions and our will. The reality of Jesus’ resurrection has specific life changing implications for all of us. Since that first Easter morning, the chant that has echoed constantly throughout the company of believers known as the church, has been: He’s alive!

It’s the cry that has enabled the Christian Church, not only to survive but to absolutely thrive over more than 2000 years of history – despite numerous attempts to quench its influence. And while we may think the church in the western world is not as strong as it once was (and that’s partly true), the expansion of Christianity in developing nations like Africa, parts of Asia and the sub-continent, is breath taking. Every week thousands of people around the world are being converted to Christianity and are experiencing the blessings, the freedom and the power behind the assertion: He’s alive!

But you know, certain things need to happen before we can fully experience resurrection power in our lives. Some of these requirements are referred to in the Biblical account of that first Easter Sunday.

According to John's Gospel one of the first things Peter and John noticed when they looked inside the tomb was that the graveclothes, previously wrapped around Jesus' body, had been discarded.

This is a reminder that the graveclothes of tradition (for tradition's sake): the graveclothes of self-indulgence and self-centredness which can bind Christians (and churches) – all need to be discarded to allow the regenerative power and influence of the risen Christ to transform lives and transform communities. Anything that restricts us and limits us in our walk with God and our service to others, needs to be put aside.

In Colossians 3 verse 9 and following we read: "You have discarded the old nature with its habits and put on the new nature. This is the new being which God, its creator, is constantly renewing in his own image, in order to bring you into full knowledge of himself." If resurrection and renewal are to take place, the restrictive graveclothes need to be put aside – just as they were on that first Easter morning.

Part Two

There's an extraordinary question in John 20: 15. Jesus asks Mary: "Woman, why are you crying?"

Of course she doesn't recognise him, but when you think about it, it's a ridiculous question to ask someone who's walking through a cemetery.

Why are you crying? If we went to any cemetery in Australia and wandered up to a grieving person to ask that question – imagine the response! It wasn't that Jesus had a problem with tears or emotion – far from it! He was moved to tears himself on at least one occasion we know of.

It's just that on that first Easter morning, Jesus knew something everyone else didn't know: He knew there was hope in a situation where everyone else had given up hope. He knew there was life in a situation everyone else had given up for dead.

One of the main contributions the church of Jesus Christ can make in today's contemporary society is the offer of hope, Hope at a time when many people are looking for something to cling to, something to reassure them, all is not lost. The hope Jesus offers is not a vague form of wishful thinking; it's hope more often than not, borne out of challenge and difficulty.

Let's remember, the question "why are you crying?" wasn't asked in an amusement park, (where it might have been appropriate), it was asked in a cemetery! Paul pinpoints the nature of our hope in Christ when he writes in Romans 5: 3 and 4: "We know that trouble produces endurance. Endurance brings God's approval and His approval creates hope. And this hope does not disappoint us."

The only form of hope that can be relied upon is that which stands firm in the face of hardship and trial. It reminds me of a story from Russia when the dark, ominous power of Communism had that country in its grip. Nikolai Bukharin was a leading member of the Soviet government and in 1930 he made a journey from Moscow to Kiev to address a huge assembly on the subject of atheism. During the lecture he aimed his heavy, verbal artillery at Christianity – hurling insult, argument and what he believed to be, irrefutable proof of its stupidity.

After an hour he concluded and looked out on the crowd of humble townspeople. He was certain he'd crushed any remaining faith they may have had. Then, almost defiantly he asked: "Are there any questions?"

Deafening silence filled the auditorium but then one man, highly respected in the community, approached the platform and stood behind the lectern. He surveyed the crowd, first to the left, then to the right - before shouting the ancient greeting, known well in the Russian Orthodox church: "Christ is Risen!"

En masse, the crowd rose as one person and the response was like a clap of thunder: "He is risen indeed!"

In John 20: 17 Jesus instructs Mary to go and tell the other disciples about what she has seen and experienced in the garden. Her experience of the risen Christ was never intended to be a self-indulgent exercise of personal spiritual gratification.

She was told to share the news with others and that's the call to mission and outreach which we serve under today.

"Go into all the world..." would be the final instruction from Jesus to his disciples approximately seven weeks after his resurrection.

The fact is, the message of our Lord's resurrection is meant to be communicated to every person on planet earth – it's the church's mandate for mission and outreach; more than that it's the pivotal truth around which the entire Christian message revolves. The Apostle Paul knew this and in first letter to the Corinthian church he uses strong language to emphasise this point. The passage is found in 1 Corinthians 15: 14, 19 and I like the way *The Message* version of the New Testament brings these verses to life with a contemporary freshness:

If there's no resurrection for Christ, everything we've told you is smoke and mirrors and everything you've staked your life on is smoke and mirrors. If all we get out of Christ is a little inspiration for a few short years, we're a pretty sorry lot. But the truth is Christ has been raised – the first in a long legacy of those who are going to leave the cemeteries.

That's a powerful rendition of some familiar verse. Because of what Jesus has done in shattering the powers of death, we can be sure we have an eternal destination. As the old Negro spiritual says: "This world is not our home, we're just a passin' through..."

In a society where the prospect of death is a source of anxiety for many people, this is a unique and powerful feature of the Christian message. I've conducted many funerals in my time and I've seen the difference among families who are certain their loved ones have gone to Heaven and those who aren't. Sometimes the difference is quite pronounced.

The story is told of Albert Einstein the world famous physicist who was on a train trip somewhere in Europe when the guard came through the carriage to inspect the tickets. At this point Einstein was on his hands and knees desperately searching the floor for something he'd obviously lost. The polite young guard who'd already recognised the famous man said: "Don't worry about finding your ticket Dr Einstein, I know who you are..."

"Young man", replied Einstein. "I too know who I am; what I don't know is where I'm going!"

Because of Christ's resurrection, we can know where we're going! Jesus said: "Because I live, you will live also..."

Conclusion

On this Easter Sunday, we're celebrating the exciting reality of Jesus' resurrection. And the power and reality of this marvellous truth is expressed beautifully in a simple story.

A real estate agent decided to send flowers to a family who'd just bought a new home through his business. Unfortunately, there was a terrible mix up at the florist and a sheath of beautiful flowers was delivered, but the accompanying card read "With deepest sympathy". The family was somewhat puzzled.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the city a wreath was delivered to the funeral of an elderly woman who had devoted her entire life to the service of Christ and the card attached to that floral display simply read: "Congratulations on moving to your new home...".

Father we thank you through the resurrection of Jesus we can be assured of our eternal future. Thank you that Eternity is not just a place, but a quality of life we can begin to experience in the here and now.

Amen