

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Easter Day 2008

Presented by David Reay

Someone has calculated that each hour of every day, 5,417 people die. That's a lot of dying. The old saying goes that there are only two certainties in life: death and taxes. And some people manage to arrange things rather deftly so that taxes aren't much of a problem. Which leaves death.

The government can fiddle with the tax system. Accountants can devise ways of minimising tax. Lawyers can debate the legitimacy of taxes. But death is another matter. It is the final reality.

So it would be the greatest news in the world if we discovered a cure for death. After all, the other cures for other ailments only delay death: they don't avoid it. The reason why Christians figure that Easter Eggs, Easter Shows, Easter Bunnies aren't the centre of Easter, is that they believe a cure for death has been discovered. Jesus, God in human form, rose from death. He conquered the last enemy. He invites us to put our trust in him, to give ourselves to him, so we too can share in his victory.

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Jesus has dealt a death blow to death. Not that he abolishes the actual cessation of physical life. Our hearts will one day stop beating; our brains will one day stop functioning. In this sense, physical death is still inevitable. But Jesus shows us we need not stay dead. It works like this. God is the source of life. While we have physical life, we remain in some sort of contact with him as his creation. So we are connected to the lifegiver, though not necessarily friends with him. When we die, we are called to account by God for our relationship with him. If we have chosen to live a life independent of him, if we have chosen to refuse his offer of forgiveness and new life, he will honour our choice. We have chosen to spend eternity away from him, the lifegiver. We thus don't know any real life. Death is truly the end because we have locked out the lifegiver from our lives.

However, those who trust in Jesus for forgiveness and friendship with God find their connection with the lifegiver continues after death. They too are called to account. They are seen to have placed their destinies in the hand of Jesus and are accounted as belonging to God, the lifegiver. Their physical death, therefore, hasn't been the end. They go on living, in new bodies, with perfected relationship with God and those who likewise belong to God. Such people are not simply the good and respectable people. We experience victory over death, eternal life, not by our goodness. We experience it through trusting in the goodness of Jesus and receiving his gracious mercy. We retain connection with the lifegiver eternally. Death is not fatal for us.

Easter proclaims there is victory over death, but it also causes us to focus on the reality of physical death. We can't talk about resurrection without talking about death. Resurrection presumes dying. So what sort of attitudes do we have to death? And what does the Easter message say to these attitudes?

We can fear death. This fear can take two forms. It can take the form of ignoring death, refusing to face up to its inevitability. Fear can take the form of denial. True, we don't want to become preoccupied with death, but to constantly refuse to consider it is to ignore reality. Some argue that

they simply want to focus on life, so death doesn't get a look in. But while we ought to focus on life, ignoring death doesn't make sense. Ignoring death may cause us to ignore Jesus' offer of forgiveness which makes it possible for us to share in his resurrection. Ignoring death may mean ignoring God. Refusing to think of where I will spend eternity is short sighted. Giving no thought to death might mean giving no thought to how death has been conquered.

Then again, fear can take a much more direct form. It can create terror. It's very inevitability can lead us to dread. Woody Allen: "I'm not afraid of death, I just don't want to be there when it happens." This fear, like any fear, can shape our lives. If we are afraid of something or someone, the energy we expend in avoiding that thing or person shapes our lives. Fear of death can lead us to wrong sort of living. Eat, drink and be merry. Live only for the present moment. Immerse ourselves in addictions that shield us from reality at least for a time.

Fear of death is reasonable if we face eternity away from the source of all true life. But Easter tells us we need not fear. We can have relationship with God now, and relationship with him as we physically die. That relationship is the constant, and because God is the lifegiver, we realise death will not be fatal. George MacDonald: "I came from God, I'm going back to God. I won't have any gaps of death in between."

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And then there is what we could call puzzlement over death. Some people are simply confused. They are not so much afraid or in denial. They just see death as some mysterious void. It may be terrible, but it may be good. Who knows. Jesus doesn't dispel all mystery. He doesn't clear up every issue. But he does provide some solid truths. He says that we will have new bodies and be perfect in relationship with him and one another. He says there will be no more sadness or pain, or loss. He says that this sort of life is open to any who realise they need his forgiveness and who choose to belong to him in this life. He says that our faults and failings can be covered by his serving our death sentence for us and taking our guilt on himself.

He also says that apart from him there is no prospect of such a life. If we reject him till our dying breath, then he honours our choice and we are apart from the lifegiver forever. Jesus tells us there are two destinies and we choose our destiny. No puzzlement there. So there is fear of death and puzzlement over death. There is also a longing for death. Witness the longing to die of those pleading for voluntary euthanasia. Life doesn't hold anything for them any more. Witness the many who commit suicide, the ultimate expression of hopelessness. Life can be so unbearable for some that anything is better. Whenever we live life apart from the lifegiver, we fall short of what we could be. Sometimes our connection with God the lifegiver grows so weak that we give up all hope. Sometimes our pain is such that we figure death is the only release from it.

We can understand this longing, though we ourselves may not all experience it. But longing for death may be like going from the frying pan to the fire. Death as absence from God the lifegiver is no gain. We might regard death as a merciful release from suffering. But release to what? Unless we are sure of where we stand with God, unless we are sure we have taken hold of his forgiveness, we must hesitate about longing for death. Jesus rose from death to conquer an enemy. If death were a universal friend, he would not have gone to the trouble. He overcame death because it wasn't something to be embraced and welcome. It was an alien, unwelcome intruder into his plans for men and women.

So how does Easter shape my view of death? It doesn't leave me simply puzzled. Jesus makes it clear that one of two general destinies await me, and makes it clear how I can embrace a destiny. It doesn't leave me fearful. Why fear something that will usher me into God's perfect presence where

every tear will be wiped away? It doesn't cause me to long for death, because this same Jesus who promised me life after death has also promised me life before death. He breathes hope into my hopelessness.

Of course I may not treat Jesus as alive and I thus may sink back into my bad habits and my distorted attitudes towards death. This poem by Lois Cheney describes such a response. "Once upon a time there was a God who so loved the world he gave his son, his only son. And they hung him on a cross and that son died. And they buried the son, sealed him up tight. But God said "Oh no you don't" and he rolled back the rock, he unsealed his son, and his son came out. Came out walking and breathing. And he was alive, and he's alive today, and he walks around and he stalks around, breathing life. Then every morning just before dawn for thousands of years, little grim people sneak up to the grave and roll back the stone and seal it up tight. And every morning God roars "Oh no you don't" and he flings back the stone and out walks Jesus all over again.

"Out stalks the grinning, striding Jesus. Tight lipped people hover all day around the tomb and cover it with incense. And bow before it and walk before it, and sigh before it, and pray to it and sing to it and weep to it and lean on it. And no one notices, or at least they pretend not to notice, the living, breathing, walking, talking Jesus out on the edge calling, "Hey! Hey you!"

Jesus is alive and he makes all the difference to life and to death. Easter tells us we need not rage against the dying of the light of life. The light of life is extinguished only because the light of a new life has come, and has come for good.

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Jesus' resurrection made all the difference to certain people on that first Easter morning.

First there was Mary Magdalene. Mary had come to Jesus when she was delivered from some evil spirits. We don't know the details, but she was in great need and obviously had come to appreciate all that Jesus had done for her. Now she was weeping at the tomb on Easter morning. It was bad enough that the one who had changed her life was dead, but it was even worse that his body had vanished. She didn't immediately recognise the figure who spoke to her.

Once this figure called her by name, she knew him. For Mary Magdalene, this was the one who had rescued her from despair, who had accepted her in a society which tended to marginalise women, especially troubled women. For her, Easter Day was a time of comfort. She had not been abandoned after all. She had not given herself to a lost cause after all.

Jesus encountered Mary in her personal pain and loss. She was not so much wrestling with intellectual issues, but mourning the loss of a friend. She had been brought in from the cold by Jesus and now feared she may be back out in the cold again. She encountered Jesus through tears, through heartfelt expression of emotion. In her crazy mixed up life filled with exploitation and futility, Jesus had brought meaning and belonging. The resurrection showed Mary that her dream had not died. Life would not go back to normal.

Then there was Thomas, called doubting Thomas (John 20:24-29). He wasn't with the other disciples when Jesus first appeared to them, and he wasn't going to take their word for it. Unless he had physical proof he would not believe Jesus was alive again. Jesus accommodated him, and when Thomas had seen he did believe.

Thomas was a hard head, not given to flights of emotion, not given to kissing his brains goodbye in order to satisfy some emotional need. He needed not warm reassuring words, but hard evidence. He

got it. And when he did, he didn't hesitate to acknowledge that Jesus was truly his master and God himself. Thomas knew that if he had in fact risen from the dead, all his other claims about his divinity and authority were also true. This risen Jesus was no phantom, no figment of his imagination. Life for Thomas would never be the same again. Life for him would not go back to normal.

The risen Jesus can meet each one of us. We may struggle with doubts as to whether such a miracle as the resurrection is possible. We may struggle with the feeling that we are all alone, that our tears and our sadness are ours to bear alone. We may struggle with the sense of failure, that we are consigned to the sidelines in life, having had our chances and blown them.

To each such person the risen Jesus can come alongside and see us through the struggle. A dead God can't do that. A set of principles can't do that. A concept of a supreme being can't do that. A God who is simply within me as a projection of my inner self can't do that.

A living faith requires a living God, not a dead abstraction. When Jesus appeared to Mary, and Thomas, he showed that our faith is securely anchored to a living God. He showed that our faith is not only good for this life but actually assures of a life to come that never ends. Jesus has pushed open the previously locked door of death and those who take hold of his hand are also led through it.

You still may think it is too good to be true. In fact, it is too good not to be true.

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The Easter hymn says it all:

The strife is o'er the battle done,
Now is the victor's triumph won.
O let the song of praise be sung.
Alleluia!

Death's mightiest powers have done their worst,
And Jesus has his foes dispersed.
Let shouts of joy and praise outburst.
Alleluia!

On the third day he rose again,
Glorious in majesty to reign.
Sing out with joy the glad refrain.
Alleluia!

Lord over death, our wounded king,
Save us from Satan's deadly sting.
That we might live for you and sing
Alleluia!