

Easter Sunday Sermon: Good news!

Hallelujah! Christ is risen.

(He is risen indeed)

He is risen indeed. And that is the reason we have gathered here today. In fact, that is the reason we ever gather here. Because he is risen. The resurrection of Jesus is the basis of the Christian faith and the basis of the church.

He is risen indeed. The resurrection of Jesus on that first Easter morning, confirms everything that Jesus said, every claim that Jesus made, and every command that Jesus gave.

He is risen indeed. The resurrection of Jesus confirms him not just as the messiah that the people of God expected, but confirms that Jesus is the Son of God.

He is risen indeed. The resurrection of Jesus confirms his victory over death. From the cross Jesus declared 'It is finished' (John 19:30). The work of salvation was complete. In his death on the cross, Jesus died for us. In our place. And his resurrection confirms the completeness of that sacrifice. The power of death is defeated. As we will sing a bit later "For her Lord is living, death has lost its sting".

After his death on the cross on Friday, and his burial in the tomb, the followers of Jesus were a defeated lot. Their leader had been arrested, tried, beaten and crucified. It was likely that they would be next. So they hid. They hid behind locked doors.

But Jesus wasn't just their leader, he wasn't just their teacher, but he was their friend too. They missed him. They mourned for him.

But then, Sunday morning came, and as we've heard in our reading from Mark's gospel, some of his women followers, with the appropriate spices, ventured out from hiding, to give their fallen leader and friend a proper burial.

When they got there, though, they found the stone that sealed the tomb had rolled away, and when they went inside, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed.

“Don’t be alarmed,” he said. “You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him.

Jesus had told his disciples many times during his ministry that he would die and rise again. Back at Caesaria Philippi when he told them that “The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and scribes, and be killed and on the third day be raised.” (Lk 9:21), and on the way to Jerusalem when he told them “[the Son of Man] will be handed over to the gentiles and; and he will be mocked and insulted and spat upon. After they have flogged him, they will kill him, and on the third day, he will rise again” (Lk 18:32-33).

They should have known, they should have understood, but they didn’t. I guess to see Jesus on the cross, his body taken down and entombed, just seemed so final. It’s easy for us to say “they should have known” – but we have the privilege of knowing how it all turned out.

So the young man in a white robe, an angel if you like, needs to tell them what has happened, “He has risen! He is not here.”

Can you imagine the emotions of Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome? It had been all over. They’d seen Jesus die. They’d seen his body taken down from the cross. They’d seen his body sealed in the tomb. He was dead.

Except now, he wasn’t dead. He had risen!

But even in the midst of this joy, the three women had a job to do. The young man told them “But go, tell his disciples and Peter”. Tell them the good news.

Hallelujah! Christ is risen. (He is risen indeed).

But the sharing of the good news didn’t stop there.

Because as we read the gospel accounts, we find Jesus appeared to the disciples, and those that had been hiding were transformed. Their despair turned to joy. Their fear turned to courage. Their doubt and uncertainty turned to a strong faith – and a strong desire to share that faith.

Soon they were out in the streets, in the open, proclaiming with joy and passion the good news of salvation through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ – the Son of God.

That is the heart of the gospel. As Paul says to the Corinthians in our second reading today, “For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.” (1 Cor 15:3-4)

Paul says this in the context of reminding his Corinthian readers: Back in verse one and two, he says “Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.”

Paul says to the Corinthians. Remember: this is why we’re here. Don’t forget.

And he says the same thing to us: This is why we’re here. Don’t forget.

We can get distracted from that. We might say we’re here because there’s good fellowship. Or good music. Or because we do good things and support good causes. Or because there’s good preaching. Or short preaching. Or because it’s where we’ve always come. Or whatever it may be.

Those things might all be true for us, but underneath it all, we need to remember – and sometimes we like the Corinthians – need to be reminded of that simple message. The heart of the gospel: Jesus died for us. Jesus rose for us.

Paul goes on his letter to the Corinthians, to flesh out the story in the growth of the church – from those few followers in Jerusalem, to himself, and ultimately to the Corinthians. It’s a personal story – the risen Jesus appeared first to Cephas – Peter – and then the twelve and then to more than five hundred brothers and sisters, and then to James, and then to the apostles. And lastly, Paul says, he appeared to me. Despite all that Paul had done to persecute Jesus’ followers and fight the spread of the good news (and he had done a lot) Jesus appeared to him. And Paul responded

by sharing the good news of what Jesus had done to what was pretty much the ends of the earth at the time.

There's a story of a preschool class doing Easter artworks, and the teacher wanders around the room, looking at all the works in progress, and encouraging the children. The children have drawn lots of bunnies and eggs and even a few hot cross buns.

She comes up to one girl, four-year-old Sophie, who is working furiously, hunched over one end of her paper.

The teacher looks at what Sophie has already done... and there's a cross in the corner. "Nice work, Sophie, that's a very nice hot cross bun".

"No." Sophie says, "That's Jesus' empty cross"

The teacher isn't really into such things, and just near the cross is a nice, round shape.

"Ahh... a very good easter egg".

"No." Sophie says, "That's Jesus' empty tomb"

The teacher is taken aback, and decides to stop guessing... "And what are you drawing there, Sophie?"

Sophie continues drawing intently selecting crayons and adding detail to her artwork.

"I'm drawing Jesus, Miss".

The teacher chuckles, and says "But no one really knows what Jesus looks like, do they?"

Sophie sighs, "Only because I haven't finished my picture of him, yet".

And I wonder... if someone asked you to tell them about Jesus, what would you tell them? What picture of Jesus would you share with them?

Or perhaps, if you're not quite ready to share your own picture of Jesus, how have you seen Jesus portrayed by others?

And what picture of Jesus do we as a church share with others?

Does that picture inspire people to say "Hallelujah! Christ is risen."?

Or do we not quite get that far? Do we say that Jesus was a wise teacher, and a man of peace, and stood up against the religious institutions of his day... and they are certainly popular things to share.

But listen again to what Paul says to the Corinthians: “For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures”.

Jesus was a wise teacher and a man of peace and stood up against the religious institutions of his day, but the most important thing is that he died for our sins, that he was buried, and that he rose again.

That’s the reason we’re here today. That’s the gospel. That’s the good news.

It’s good news. It’s the best news. It’s the news the world needs.

Because we know that things aren’t great in the world. A quick look at yesterday’s headlines in the Herald: “Woman dead, two critical after mass drug overdose”, “Youth crime: The town where a five-year-old broke into a house to steal a car”, “Highway closed, motorcyclist dead after truck collision”, “‘More apparent every day’, a bigger war to come, says Poland’s PM”, and on it goes.

We know from our lives that things aren’t good. And overwhelmingly the problem is people. People like us. Paul says in his letter to the Romans “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23).

We try. People try. We try to make things better. Sometimes we even manage to make some things better. But our experience is – and thousands of years of history shows, that we can’t solve all the problems of this world – this fallen world.

But despite that, God sent his only son, into this fallen world. He lived a sinless life, and he taught, and healed, and was a man of peace and stood against the religious institutions of his time, but what is of first importance, is that on the cross he “For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures”.

We can become so used to the message “Hallelujah! Christ is risen” – that the response “He is risen indeed”, can become automatic, and we can miss just how wonderful, how powerful, that message is.

But that message is the good news. That’s the good news that brings us here today. That’s the good news that has encouraged and grown and sustained the church for more than two thousand years. From that small group of disciples hiding behind locked doors in Jerusalem who first heard the good news from the women who had hurried from the empty tomb – through generations of faithful Christians who have carried that gospel across the years and to the ends of the earth.

So this Easter, hear that good news for the first time, or the five hundredth time. Paul tells us that the good news, the gospel is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes.

Hallelujah! Christ is risen.