

1 Corinthians 15:1-11 | Sermon for Easter Sunday

Acts 10:34-43/ Psalm 118:1,2,14-24 / 1 Corinthians 15:1-11 / Mark 16.1-8

Proclaimed on 31 March 2024, at Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Adelaide by Pastor Tom Pietsch.

Heavenly Father, give us confidence in the resurrection of your Son Jesus Christ, so that we may live according to your eternal plan. In Jesus' name. Amen.

God's plan

Today we celebrate, not just the highpoint of our faith, but of the whole world. God's eternal plan has been fulfilled and restored, salvation has been won, and has also now come to us. The sinful hostility which divided us has been defeated once, and for all.

God first created humanity not out of wrath or boredom, but love. He created us, male and female, very good, and created us to live in blessedness and holiness, in peace with each other, and in harmony with God. Our abuse of this gift then led to sin, sickness and death. But our sin never affected God's intentions, which were the same – that all people would live in eternal joy with Him and harmony with one another.

So God eternal, made himself mortal. If we would not live with Him, if we would go our own way, then He would come and live with us, as one of us, for our salvation. And so He came, was born in our world, took up our flesh, took up our humanity and mortality, that He might die a man of sorrows, on our behalf, for us – an innocent and righteous man put to death for our sake. In this way He atoned for our sin and rebellion. But He also destroyed death, and in rising from the grave, He has fulfilled God's plan to save the world, to save you. To restore you to joyous fellowship with God, and also, by the forgiveness of sins, to restore you to harmony with each other, full now that you are of supernatural love and divine power. The resurrection fulfils our humanity, it brings us to what we were created to be, it restores what was lost, raises what was fallen. It is "*of first importance*" in the words of St Paul from our 1 Corinthians reading (15:3).

St Paul proclaims this because he knows that we can be tempted to make the resurrection of secondary or tertiary importance, or really of no importance at all. After all, we want to live in the real world of stable thinking, and we can be very tempted to consider a comfortable life of first importance. We can thus be tempted either to deny the resurrection, or to ignore the resurrection. And I want to look at both of these temptations: denying and ignoring the resurrection.

Jesus the Truth (Denying the resurrection)

First let's look at denying the resurrection.

The Weekend Australian newspaper sometimes turns to the writer Peter Craven to write something for Christian festivals, like Easter and Christmas. He often writes quite thoughtful and educated pieces, like one a few years back when he reflected on the 'haunted, shadowed time of Easter'. In this article, he soaked in the mystery of the Passion, especially through the painters and poets and musicians of the past. He even brought home this drama to our own lives by quoting The Book of Common Prayer: *We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; And we have done those things which we ought not to have done; And there is no health in us.* But then, near the end of his piece, he wrote, "The odd thing about Easter is that it really is haunted by the spirit of the greatest story we have ever told ourselves." Then, in his Easter piece two years later, he referred to Easter as the "fundamental myth" of our culture.

But the spirit of Easter is not simply the greatest story we have told ourselves, much less merely a myth. At the heart of Easter, its Spirit, is the proclamation that Jesus Christ is truly risen from the dead. The very source texts of Easter, and the primary witnesses, all proclaim this. We heard about the empty tomb in our Gospel reading, which all of Jerusalem could see, and was not just a private story but a public event. And then in our reading from 1 Corinthians St Paul tells us that when Jesus rose from the dead *"He appeared to Cephas/Peter, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than 500 brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died"* (1 Corinthians 15:5-6). St Paul is unabashedly confident in the sure testimony of the eyewitnesses that they had seen the Risen Lord, telling the Corinthians that most of these hundreds of people are still alive and so able to be questioned about it. And this includes the apostles themselves. Those often weak men, who fell away when Christ was dying, now witness the risen Christ, and almost all of them end up being slaughtered and martyred, finding a new confidence, proclaiming to their graves that Jesus lives, He is Risen!

All of the art, music, and even consolation that comes from the death and resurrection of Christ is built upon this truth. It is a beautiful edifice, but its foundation stone is the truth that Christ is risen. If this is simply a story we tell ourselves, then away with it. If it's not of first importance then it ought to be of no importance. A Jesus of our own invention will not do – a tame Jesus, a Jesus made in our own image, who obeys our expectations, a Jesus emptied of all his power. That's the fanciful story. That's the story we tell ourselves to dodge the real Jesus, the Jesus who is not in our own image, but in the image of God, the Jesus who is present with us now. The Jesus who is Risen from the Dead.

Jesus the Comforter (Ignoring the resurrection)

This brings me to the other danger we face. Not so much denying the resurrection, but strangely ignoring it, as if it's power is too great for us, as if we do not want to be caught up in the great drama that it involves, calling us out of our comfort zone.

In this vain, I think we can sometimes find Good Friday a more comfortable reality than Easter Sunday. Let me explain.

Sometimes when a Christian person is suffering, when one of us is carrying a heavy cross with sorrow and pain, we can sometimes console one another by saying that Jesus is suffering with us. That, just as Christ suffered on the cross, so too He suffers on the hospital bed, in the funeral home, in the gutters and slums. And there is truth to this, that Christ is the man of sorrows, and all of our sorrow, especially the sufferings we face for bearing God's name, is somehow a participation in his own. I know that I've said such things in words of comfort from time to time. It is true, after all. And yet it also can't be the full story. It is not finally comforting simply that Jesus suffers with us. It can even be troubling.

If all that God can do for us in our suffering is somehow reflect and mirror what we're feeling, like a caring cosmic therapist, then our faith is in vain. If all God can offer is an 'I feel your pain' to someone in the pits of suffering, then our faith is in vain. No. Today we proclaim that Christ's suffering and resurrection triumphs over sin, death and the devil. That if Christ had not risen from the dead our faith would be in vain (1 Corinthians 15:14). That His resurrection has accomplished nothing less than our restoration to eternal life, and blessedness with God. That all things are being put right. That a new heaven and a new earth is coming, is in fact already here, and every tear will be wiped away. For Jesus lives. He is Risen.

It's one thing to confess that God has seen and known firsthand what life is like in our prison cell. It brings a certain comfort. But it is another thing altogether to proclaim that God now brandishes the key to unlock the prison door and lead us out, while demolishing the prison and razing it to a smouldering heap, before then leading us to a new city of heavenly splendour.

The cross is no comfort if there is no way out of the grave. But today God reveals that His power has no limits, and is stronger than the grave. For Christ Jesus by His resurrection has conquered death, and so conquered sin which leads to death – emptying them all of their finality, of their ability to have the last word and so define us. Today we proclaim that we are not defined by death, or sin, but by Christ's victory, and his restoration of us to peace with God, and joy as God's beloved children and members of his kingdom.

In Christ we do have a High Priest who is able 'to sympathize with our weaknesses' (Hebrews 4.15), we have 'a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief' (Isaiah 53.3). But we also have one who has taken on this suffering and won. 'Death is swallowed up in victory' (1 Cor 15.54). 'I am the resurrection and the life', he proclaims, 'whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live.' (John 11.25) The resurrection cannot be ignored.

He is risen!

For today our season of fasting has come to an end. Today we feast, we must feast, and be full with the joy of the Lord. For this is the day that the Lord has made, the day that the Lord Jesus has risen again, the day that the devil has been defeated, and the day that God's plan is fulfilled, and salvation has been won for you. The cosmic drama has reached its point of redemption, and you are being caught up in the victory, called to the banquet, filled with a heavenly power stronger than death.

This is of first importance.

Christ is risen! **He is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

And may the peace of God that passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.