

Text: John 20.1-10  
St Stephen's

March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2008  
Easter

## Easter Judgment and Easter Forgiveness

Isn't it something how we find, every Easter, every Christmas, a flood of **shows and stories on the subject of Jesus**. Our fascination with him runs deep. Sometimes the articles and shows are serious, sometimes they are hilarious. I heard this year how a child in Sunday School confused Easter with Groundhog Day. The boy said that Easter is when Jesus comes out of his tomb . . . but that if he sees his shadow he has to go back inside for another six weeks – must have been one of our Pa kids!

But our children are **not the only ones who are confused about Easter**. We hear so often that Easter is all about what happened when Jesus died. Or that Easter is about what happens when Christians die – or what happens when I die. And it certainly has things to say about those important matters. But even those ideas fail to grasp the breadth and depth of what Easter was all about for the early Christians. It turned out that they thought Easter was about **so much more**...

I've been reading **Tom Wright** these past weeks, dipping into his book titled "*The Resurrection of the Son of God*". Dr Wright is the Bishop of Durham in England, and a first rate NT scholar. In his 738 page book he approaches Easter as a historian, asking "*What happened?*" and "*What did the early Christians mean when they said that Jesus had been raised from the dead?*" and "*What can be said today about these matters?*".

His conclusion on the "**What happened?**" question is that the evidence can be summed up in **two baskets**: the **first** is that the **tomb was empty** on that Easter morning.

*Then Simon Peter arrived and went inside. He also noticed the linen wrappings lying there, while the cloth that had covered Jesus' head was folded up and lying apart from the other wrappings. Then the disciple who had reached the tomb first (John) also went in, and he saw and believed* John 20:6-8 (NLT)

What brought John to faith was the empty tomb and a second piece of evidence – the burial cloths lying in separate folded piles – exactly as they would if Jesus' body had been raised right through them – and through the wall of the tomb, by the way. John saw – and believed.

2000 years later that empty tomb remains undisputed. His dead body was gone, and his bones have never been found.

The **second basket** of evidence is that **large numbers of his followers claimed to see him** again and again, very much alive and more than well. Among the first was Mary...

*Mary turned to leave and saw someone standing there. It was Jesus, but she didn't recognize him. "Dear woman, why are you crying?" Jesus asked her. "Who are you looking for?"*

*She thought he was the gardener. "Sir," she said, "if you have taken him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will go and get him."*

*"Mary!" Jesus said.*

*She turned to him and cried out, "Rabboni!" (which is Hebrew for "Teacher").*

John 20:14-16 (NLT)

It was a tender, wonderful, moment. The NT documents some **11 different resurrection appearances** over a 40 day period between Easter morning and his Ascension. He appeared to individuals and groups, and once to over 500 people. He appeared inside locked rooms, and walking along the road, and at a seaside meal where he ate and drank. His wounds were still visible and could be touched – he spoke and taught, he ate and drank, and he demonstrated powers and abilities that were well beyond natural capacities. **He was the same Jesus – but he was different.**

After Jesus' death, it is **the combination** of these **two baskets of facts**– the empty tomb and the multiple appearances, that create a compelling **weight of evidence** that led his followers - and thousands and thousands of others stretching forward to our own day - to life changing confidence that **Jesus had been raised from the dead.**

I read yesterday a letter to Billy Graham, from 'Z.J.'

**DEAR DR. GRAHAM:** *Do you think they'll ever find Jesus' grave with His bones in it? I respect my Christian friends who say this can't happen because Jesus came back from the dead, but I'm studying to be a doctor, and I know that once someone is dead, nothing is going to bring them back to life.*

Billy Graham points out that Luke...

*"was a medical doctor. If anyone knew from personal experience that dead people didn't come back to life, it was Luke. And yet he was absolutely convinced the words of Peter he later recorded were true: 'God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact'" (Acts 2:32).*

As **Tom Wright concludes**, now speaking as a disciplined historian, *"the [evidence] falls short of anything approaching mathematical proof, but [it] advances well beyond historical possibility to high probability".* (see Wright's conclusion, p. 687 & 688)

But now I want to **ask another question** that lurks in the background behind questions of evidence – **"So what?"**. It is Bp Wright's last and great question. **"What do we make of these things?"**

For years **I have said that the resurrection means** these kinds of things:

- That life after death is real and heaven itself is now open to us...
- That hope is solid, and as certain as Jesus' own resurrection...
- That we can have a personal relationship with this risen Jesus...

These are all true, and I am glad to remind you of them this Easter Day. But they are **not the focus of the gospel stories**, or even of the early preaching of the Apostles. Their focus was something different, I would like to let them speak to us today about **the meaning of Jesus' resurrection**. I will take our lead from a sermon of Peter, preached some 6 years after the resurrection of Jesus...

*but God raised him to life on the third day... We were those who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. And he ordered us to preach everywhere and to testify that Jesus is the one appointed*

*by God to be the judge of all—the living and the dead. He is the one all the prophets testified about, saying that everyone who believes in him will have their sins forgiven through his name.”*

Acts 10:40-43 (NLT)

Peter says that the **meaning** of the resurrection can be found in something that **is coming**, and can be found in something that **is here**. The something that is **coming** is **the judgment of the world**. The something that is **here** is **the forgiveness of sins**. Both are linked to the resurrection of Jesus.

I have **never preached an Easter message on the judgment**. Nor have I ever heard one, which shows how out of touch we are with the world of the Bible, because the Bible speaks a great deal about it.

In the view of the bible, **the world is not right**, not the way it should be. And neither are we. No one argues with this. Down deep, the bible tells us, the world is **longing to be set right**. So are people. In the language of the bible, the judgment is the time when **the world will be fixed**, will be **renewed**. When that happens, we are told, trees will clap their hands and mountains will dance and the stars will break out into song – lions and lambs will lay down together. **The judgment** is the moment God will do it.

The Bible tells us that in the beginning the world was supposed to be led by wise and good **people, in a partnership with God**. But when they gave in to temptation, the whole world fell with them. Since then everything has been **twisted and broken and bent**.

But **at the resurrection** all this began to be set right. It is **the beginning of the fix**. Tom Wright says it like this: *"there is at last an obedient human being at the helm of the universe; and the heavens and the earth rejoice at the very thought."*

Jesus is the first in the resurrection parade. But he won't be the last. The Bible says because of who he is, and what he accomplished, **he is connected** to everyone who believes in him, something like an **engine**

that pulls a **long train**, like the **first fruits** is connected to the rest of the harvest. You can **still get on that resurrection train today**.

So **His resurrection** pulls along **our resurrection**. And our resurrection is connected to **the healing of the entire cosmos**. **His resurrection, our resurrection, the restoration of the entire cosmos**. The bible word for it is '**the renewal**'. It started on that first Easter, and the whole thing is coming. The risen Lord Jesus is 'at the helm'; he is in charge; he is the 'judge'. His resurrection engine will pull the whole train along. It is that certain, that sure. **You want to be on that train!** We are told that **some will miss it**. That some don't want to be in on it. You don't want to miss it.

I want to point something out here. Often we hear today that with the **advantage of modern science**, we know that miracles don't happen and dead people don't rise and so the resurrection could not be true. And with the **advantage of our modern morality** we know the judgment could not be true.

**Tom Wright** calls this a 'Double denial'. Listen to him...

*This **double denial** clears the way for **a double affirmation** of things which western society has tried to believe for two hundred years.*

*First, Jesus' resurrection has to be got out of the way because, if it really happened, it would mean that world history reached its climax on the first Easter Day, whereas Europe and America have staked their worldview on the belief that world history reached its climax with the rise of liberal democracy.*

*Second, the idea of coming judgment has to be got out of the way because that same modern liberal democracy has claimed for itself the right to make all judgments about everything, [and deeply objects to any] judgments against its own absolute judgmental power.*

The resurrection establishes Jesus over the claims of any and every human institution, over the claims of every and any human conscience. He comes to our broken world to set everything right. That is **what is at**

**stake in our church.** That is what is at stake **in our culture.** And it has its greatest stake **in our own lives.**

**Our seminarian RJ Heijmen likes to tell the story** of the moment his 3 year old boy came to him and asked him, "*Daddy, why do I always do the wrong thing?*" That young boy is living in **an Easter world**, where there is a risen and living judge at the helm of all things, where there really is right and wrong – and where this judge himself is soon coming to set things right, bringing the great renewal of everything...

We are talking about the **meaning of the resurrection**, and how Peter said it means **something that is coming** – the judgment, the renewal – and **something that is now here** – the **forgiveness** of sins.

We are told again and again in the Bible that the **forgiveness of sins is linked to the resurrection** of Jesus. Why so? Because the resurrection demonstrates that **on the cross Jesus achieved victory** over sin and death and the powers of evil. We know that **because he was raised** from the dead. If he were still in the grave, it would not be true. It is just like that.

Today we **no more like talk of sin** than we like talk of judgment. We think we can solve our problems with a little more education, a little more money, a little more pleasure, a little more therapy. Who needs a savior, we think... But **our problems go deeper.** They are hard to shake. Hard to cover up.

It seems as though God has designed life to help us be honest about all this. Life is full of facts, and as John Adams said, '**facts are stubborn things**'. Among the most stubborn of these facts are **sin** and **failure** and **death**. Just watch the news. Look at the spectacular public failures of the governors of NY. Listen deeply to private lives of your friends. Think about the course of your own life. RJ's little boy was right. He knows **something is wrong inside him and around him.** Life teaches us that, in steady and bracing doses.

The forgiveness of sins is **the first wave in the great renewal** of all things. It is mercy, a gift from the one who is in charge of all things. His **first gift**, but not his last. It is sheer good news to those who have failed, to those who suffer, to those who can't find a way out of their captivity. It is real. Wonderful.

We didn't get to it in our reading this morning, but at the end of that graveyard meeting, Jesus finds **Mary** – first he finds sexually broken and scarred Mary Magdalene – and sends her to find **Peter** and the disciples, who 3 short days earlier had to a man denied and abandoned Jesus – and here are his words:

*"Go find my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"*

John 20:17 (NLT)

Don't you think those would be **sweet words** for them to hear? They are forgiveness words, spoken by the Judge of all things. They are Easter words...

Forgiveness is a wave that spreads, by the way. It is meant for you, but not just for you. It is meant to infect everyone you see and live with and love – and hate. It is meant to sweep down your street and into your workplace. But first of all, they are meant for you...

*'My brothers, my sisters - My father and your father; my God and your God.'*