

Jesus Still Lives and Gives Life!

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[0 : 00] It would be great if you could grab your Bibles again and turn to Acts chapter 9. Thanks to Ron for reading. And as you do that, let me begin.

Sometimes in life, it's important to see the big picture. Take a look at this stranger who thought he was helping. Have a look.

Now, I'm sure it was a bit of a set up, but it helps to see the big picture sometimes, doesn't it? And it's the same for us as we struggle on through COVID.

I don't know if you've noticed, but at the bottom of our hymn board is a number. And today it's the number 209. It's 209 days since we've been able to meet together here at church.

And after such a long time of staying at home, it's easy to become consumed with COVID and forget the bigger picture. And not just in terms of how we're still much better off here in Australia compared to many other places in the world, places we should keep praying for, but also the even bigger picture that God is still working in our world, working to spread the good news of Jesus in a world that desperately needs to hear it.

[1 : 26] You see, there is a worse pandemic than COVID called sin, because sin leads to judgment. But God is working in the world to see the good news of Jesus proclaimed that people might be forgiven.

Or in the words of our mission statement, God is working to gather and grow people in Christ. We need to remember this bigger picture so we don't get bogged down in our current situation, but keep perspective and also are kept from accidentally pushing against God and his work in the world.

And to help us remember this bigger picture, we're returning to the book of Acts as we head towards Christmas. Now, we began Acts here at Doncaster last year, but given St. John's missed the beginning of that series, and let's face it, most of us at Doncaster have forgotten that series, me included.

Let me briefly recap. The book of Acts is written by Luke. It's his sequel to Luke's gospel. And the title Acts is short for Acts of the Apostles, what the apostles did.

Although, as we'll see, it's probably better named what Jesus did, the Acts of Jesus. But the key verse for the whole book is on your screens, from chapter 1, verse 8, where Jesus says to his apostles, you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

[3 : 02] This is the key verse because this is how Luke structures his book. And so last year, we saw the gospel proclaimed in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria.

In fact, we finished with chapter 9, verse 31, the verse before our passage today. If you've got your Bibles there, have a look. Have a look at chapter 9, verse 31.

Now, where has the gospel been proclaimed and the church established so far? Well, it says Judea, Galilee and Samaria. And so what's next?

The ends of the earth. Now, we'll still see things happen in Judea and Samaria and so on. It's not as though the gospel stops working there. And in fact, we've already seen the apostle Paul proclaim the gospel in Damascus, which is outside of Judea and Samaria.

But the focus so far in the book, chapter 9, verse 31, has been Judea, Galilee and Samaria, what was once Israel.

[4 : 08] And so today marks a transition as the gospel begins to go to that next step, the ends of the earth. And to us here at the bottom of Australia in Melbourne, whom some say is the ends of the earth, though good old Tassie is further down than us.

But it wasn't going to be easy for the early church to do this, just like it's not easy for us in today's church to do this. And so before Luke really shows the apostles going to the ends of the earth, he has some lessons for us to learn in these few weeks.

He teaches us some lessons which will encourage us. And today's lesson is that Jesus still lives and gives life. In Lydda.

So point one on your screens and verse 32 in your Bibles. Have a look at verse 32. As Peter travelled about the country, he went to visit the Lord's people who lived in Lydda.

There he found a man named Aeneas, who was paralysed and had been bedridden for eight years. Aeneas, Peter said to him, Jesus Christ heals you.

[5 : 24] Get up, roll up your mat. Immediately Aeneas got up, we read. Now Lydda was one of the ten local government areas of Judea, much like Manningham or Whitehorse are.

Here it is on a map. It's a pretty rough map. But if you find the word Judea towards the bottom there and go to your left, there is Lydda. And then further up on the coast is Joppa.

And then if you go north, you find Caesarea, where Peter ends up next week. But back in Lydda, there is a Christian community that Peter goes to visit, though they're likely all Jews at this stage.

Because in verse 32, the phrase, the Lord's people is literally the saints. Now, while every Christian is a saint, I don't know if you knew that, by the way, but you are a saint if you are a Christian.

And so if your spouse or boss or someone accuses you of doing wrong, you can say, oh, wasn't me, I'm a saint. But originally, saints referred to the Jewish people, God's first people.

[6 : 33] But as Peter goes to meet this Jewish church, he meets a man with a Greek or non-Jewish name, Aeneas. Perhaps he's lying on his mat outside where the church met, hoping to get help from the church.

Because sadly, he's been paralyzed for eight years. This is no common cold. But verse 34, who heals him? Peter says, Jesus Christ heals you, doesn't he?

You see, Jesus still lives and gives life. After all, there was no Centrelink or medical facilities back then to give Aeneas much of a life at all.

And so by healing him, he would have been given physical life again. Now, of course, Jesus does do this through his apostle Peter, doesn't he?

But even the way Peter acts points us to Jesus. Like children point to their parents. In fact, just the other day, one of my children did something and Michelle said to her, you're just like your father.

[7 : 43] I don't think she meant it as a compliment, actually. But you see, this child's actions pointed Michelle to me. And I got in trouble as the one who was really responsible.

Well, here, Peter's words and actions point us to Jesus as the one who's really responsible. Because back in Luke chapter 5, you might remember, Jesus healed a paralyzed man saying, get up, take up your mat and go.

And it had immediate effect. Well, so too here in Acts, Peter says with similar words, get up, roll up your mat and go.

And it had immediate effect too. Peter acts like Jesus, doesn't he? And in so doing points us to Jesus as the one who's really responsible.

You see, Jesus still lives and gives life. But this physical life is meant to point us to eternal life. After all, when Jesus healed the paralyzed man back in Luke chapter 5, it was to point to his power to forgive sins.

[8 : 51] And to raise us to life eternal, spiritually with God now. And then physically later. Well, so too here.

And we can know this because verse 34 literally says on your screens, Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you. Rise, make up your mat yourself.

And immediately he rose. That word rise or rose is the same word Luke uses to describe Jesus's resurrection from the dead to life eternal.

And so the repetition of it suggests this is more than just physical healing on view here. It points us to Jesus who has the power to forgive sins and to raise us spiritually to life with God now.

But the bigger point here is, it's Jesus who does it. And so verse 35, notice the people turn not to Peter, all those who lived in Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord Jesus.

[10 : 07] Because it's Jesus who's done this, you see. Jesus who still lives and gives life. And not just in Lydda, but also in Joppa. I point to verse 36.

In Joppa, there was a disciple named Tabitha. In Greek, her name is Dorcas. She was always doing good and helping the poor.

About that time, she became sick and died. And her body was washed and placed in an upstairs room. Lydda was near Joppa. So when the disciples heard that Peter was in Lydda, they sent two men to him and urged him, please come at once.

And so back on the map, you can see where Peter's moved from Lydda up to Joppa on the coast. It's where Jonah fled to and is still a port city in Israel today.

Though it's called by its Arabic name Jaffa, which sounds yummy, by the way. Here is a picture of it. Sorry. I know that's such a dad joke.

[11 : 13] Here's an actual picture of the city. And it's quite a beautiful looking city, isn't it? Now, while this was a Jewish city, even in Peter's day, there were lots of Greeks there, which explains why Tabitha was also known by her Greek name, Dorcas.

Now, I think I prefer Tabitha myself. But it's not an unusual practice to have two names. People in our church today go by two names.

Some have a Persian name and an English name, and some have a Chinese name and an English name. And which one they use, it depends on which community they're mixing with at the time.

But Tabitha was an outstanding woman. In fact, we're told she was always doing good and helping the poor. What a way to be remembered.

In fact, she is so loved that when the church hears of Peter's proximity, some think Peter can save her, which explains why they don't bury her, but place her in an upstairs room, at probably her own home.

[12 : 25] And then they summon Peter. And so we pick it up at verse 39. Peter went with them. And when he arrived, he was taken upstairs to the room.

All the widows stood around him, crying and showing him the robes and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was still with them.

Here, when Peter arrives, he's confronted by weeping widows. Death is heartbreaking, isn't it? But it's interesting, it's only the widows crying.

Perhaps because Tabitha was one of them and closest to them. Or perhaps because they didn't think Peter could actually do anything. And they're right.

He can't. But Jesus can. Because what does Peter do next? Well, verse 40. Peter sent them all out of the room.

[13 : 25] Then he got down on his knees and prayed. Like Elijah in our first reading, pray to God because he knew only God can raise the dead.

So Peter does here. He knows he has no power himself to raise the dead, but he knows Jesus can. And so after praying, we read in verse 40.

Turning toward the dead woman, he said, Tabitha, get up. She opened her eyes and seeing Peter, she sat up. He took her by the hand and helped her to her feet.

Then he called for the believers, especially the widows, and presented her to them alive, we read. Tabitha, who was once dead, is now alive and can be seen as such by all.

You see, Jesus still lives and gives life. Of course, like before, it's through his apostle, Peter. But also like before, Peter's actions and words point us to Jesus as the one who's really doing this.

[14 : 37] You see, not only does he pray, but the miracle itself sounds like one of Jesus's. Do you remember Jairus' daughter when Jesus raised his dead daughter to life?

And so on the slide, you can see a comparison between their accounts. Jairus urged Jesus just as the disciples urged Peter. When Jesus arrived at Jairus' house, all the people were weeping.

When Peter arrived, all the widows were weeping. In Mark's account, Jesus put everyone outside. Here, Peter puts everyone outside. And Jesus said, child, get up.

Peter said, Tabitha, get up. In fact, in Mark's account, Jesus said, talitha cum, because the word for little child is talitha, which looks a whole lot like Tabitha, doesn't it?

You see, there are just too many parallels for this to be a coincidence. Rather, Peter's words and actions point us to Jesus as the one who's really responsible.

[15 : 42] The one who still lives and gives life even over death, which means he really can give us life eternal.

And not just spiritual life now with God, such that he is our heavenly father and we can be certain that when we die, our souls will not die, but go to be with him.

And not just that spiritual life, but also physical life later when he raises our bodies from the dead to enjoy life in a COVID-free creation.

In fact, verses 40 to 41 again literally uses the word rise twice. You see the point? Jesus still lives and gives life.

I've been repeating it enough, I think. And so again, people believe not in Peter, but in the Lord Jesus. Have a look at verse 42. This became known all over Joppa and many people believed in the Lord.

[16 : 51] And in doing so, they received life eternal. If you're listening in today and you're not sure you've got eternal life, firstly, thank you for tuning in.

But secondly, do what the people did here. Turn to the Lord and believe in Him. Then you will have new spiritual life with God now and the guarantee of physical life later in a COVID-free creation.

And for us who already have life eternal, then do you see the lesson Luke wants us to learn today? that Jesus still lives and gives life, whether in Lydda or in Joppa or point three in Melbourne.

How? Well, through His apostles. And not through their physical presence, of course. After all, they've long since died and there are no more apostles today, no matter what some churches claim.

we saw that there are no more apostles earlier on in Acts when we looked at the criteria of an apostle and we won't go over it now. But rather, Jesus gives this life through the apostles' word.

[18 : 14] For it's the apostles' word that points us to Jesus as the one who's really responsible. It's the apostles' word through which Jesus gives us life eternal. Now, of course, God can give healing or physical life to, either through doctors or divine intervention.

I've seen both happen. But remember, even Peter's miracles pointed us to Jesus and life eternal. That's the focus.

And the way Jesus gives this life is through the words of the apostles spoken by us here in Melbourne today, even during through COVID.

At one of our parish council meetings recently, we heard how some of our Chinese congregations have run evangelistic courses online which have shared the apostles' word about Jesus.

And people have become Christians for real. Of course, the Chinese pastors are now trying to work out how to baptize them socially distanced, maybe with a bucket, just splash them with water or something.

[19 : 27] Or recently we prayed for Cross and Crown, a church plant down at Glen Waverley, where one of their friends became a Christian during COVID. And so he has life eternal now.

And the point is, even here in Melbourne, Jesus still lives and gives life. Whether litter or jopper, or here in Melbourne.

And so for us today, we're firstly to remember the bigger picture. That there is a bigger pandemic out there than COVID called sin, but that there's bigger news to deal with it than dropping case numbers.

There's actually a vaccine called the gospel. And there's bigger work that God is doing to deal with COVID than dealing with COVID, the work of growing his kingdom.

We're to remember this bigger picture so that we don't get bogged down by our own situation, but keep perspective and are kept from neglecting God's work or even accidentally, you know, from the start pushing against him.

[20 : 37] And second, we're to remember Luke's lesson here today, that Jesus still lives and gives life, which ought to give us confidence.

Confidence that, you know, we're not alone when we're feeling fed up or facing a lockdown extension. In fact, I was talking with someone from our 9am service recently who lives on their own and has only allowed one visitor into their village.

And when I asked how I could pray for her, she said, just thank God that I'm not alone. I've got Jesus with me by my side. I love him dearly.

Isn't that great? She remembers Jesus still lives and so it gives her confidence that she's not alone. But the main application is we can have confidence to be part of God's work, doing what we can to see the apostles' word go out to the ends of the earth.

And so some of our church members did ESL at church where the ends of the earth come to us actually. And back in July, one of our members contacted me about getting the gospel to one of her Chinese students.

[21 : 55] So we got a tract which summarized the apostles' word about Jesus in Chinese. And we got it to her via contactless delivery, if you like.

But the point is, our member was keen to do this because she knows Jesus still lives and gives life through the word of his apostles.

And so it gave her confidence to get that word to her non-Christian student, that that student might turn to the Lord and find life eternal.

Or with Christmas approaching, we've already started working on how to help you invite people to hear the apostles' word about Jesus, which won't be easy, will it? You know, your heart starts pounding and you're not sure how they're going to respond when you invite people and so on.

But if we remember today's lesson, it ought to give us confidence to have a go, to know we're not wasting our time, even if they say no, because Jesus still lives and gives life.

[23 : 05] Let's pray. Our gracious Heavenly Father, we do thank you for this reminder this morning that our Lord still lives and gives life.

We pray, Father, that you would help us to remember this bigger picture of what you are doing in the world so we don't get bogged down by our situation with COVID. And we pray that you would help us to remember Luke's lesson from your word today, that we might have confidence to do what we can to see this good news go out, even during COVID.

We ask it in Jesus name. Amen.