

Jesus Still Lives and Gives Life!

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning. Can I add my welcome to VJ2 this morning, both for our regulars at St. John's or Holy Trinity, but also for those who might be tuning in from elsewhere in Australia and indeed around the world.

It's great to have you at our 10.30 online service. For those who don't know me, my name is Andrew. And apologies for those who have missed some songs. We had a couple of technical difficulties.

So we've missed a couple of songs, but we'll have a couple more later on in our service this morning. Hopefully you've got your Bibles there. And as you turn back to Acts chapter 9, let me begin by saying that sometimes in life, it's important to see the big picture.

So take a look at this stranger who thought he was helping. Have a look. I'm pretty sure it was a setup, but the point still stands that sometimes it helps to see the big picture, doesn't it?

And the same is true for us here 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.

[1 : 15] I don't know if you can see it on your TVs there. It's 209 is the number. That number represents how many days it's been since we've been able to meet together here at church.

It's a long time, isn't it? And after such a long time of staying at home, it's easy to be consumed with COVID and forget the bigger picture. Not just in terms of how we're actually much better off here in Melbourne, even despite our restrictions, than many other places, many other countries in the world.

Countries we ought to keep praying for, actually. But also not to forget the even bigger picture, that God is still working to spread the word about Jesus in a world that desperately needs to hear it.

You see, there is a worse pandemic than COVID called sin, because sin leads to judgment, doesn't it? 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. And we need to remember this bigger picture so we don't get bogged down by our current situation.

[2 : 39] But keep perspective and are kept from pushing accidentally against God, like we saw at the start. And to help us remember this bigger picture, we're returning to the book of Acts as we head towards Christmas.

We began Acts here at Doncaster last year, and I realise St. John's have missed that series. But let's face it, most of us at Doncaster have forgotten that series anyway, me included.

So let me give us all a bit of a brief recap. The book of Acts was written by Luke. It's the sequel to his Gospel of Luke. And the title Acts is short for the Acts of the Apostles, the things the apostles did.

Although, as we'll see, it's really the things Jesus did through them. But the key verse for the whole book is on your screens. Chapter 1, verse 8, where Jesus speaks to the apostles and says, You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

Now this is the key verse for the book because this is how Luke structures his book. And so last year, we saw the Gospel proclaimed in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria.

[3 : 58] In fact, we finished at chapter 9, verse 31, the verse just before our passage today. So if you've got your Bibles there, have a look at that verse just before our passage and have a look where the Gospel has been proclaimed and the church established so far.

Do you see it? Judea, Galilee and Samaria. So what's next according to our key verse? Well, the ends of the earth, isn't it?

Now we'll still see things happen in Judea and so on. It's not as though the Gospel stops working there. And in fact, Paul has already proclaimed the Gospel in Damascus, which is outside of Judea and Samaria.

But the focus so far in the book has been chapter 9, verse 31, Judea, Galilee and Samaria, which was Israel. And so today marks a transition as the Gospel begins to go to that next step, the ends of the earth.

To even us here at the bottom of Australia in Melbourne, whom some say is the ends of the earth. Although, good old Tassie is further down than we are.

[5 : 11] But it wasn't going to be easy for the early church to do this. Just like it's not going to be easy for us to do this in today's church. And so before Luke really shows the apostles taking this Gospel out to the ends of the earth, he teaches us some lessons over the next few weeks to encourage us.

And today's lesson is that Jesus still lives and gives life in Lydda. So point 1 and verse 32.

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. Get up and roll up your mat. Immediately, Aeneas got up. We read here of a place called Lydda, which was one of the ten local government areas of Judea.

A kind of like Manningsham or Whitehorse, if you like. Here on your screens is a very rough map, but if you find the word Judea towards the bottom of your screen there and then go left, there's Lydda and then further left towards the coast is Joppa and then if you go up north is Caesarea where Peter ends up next week.

[6 : 36] But back in Lydda, there is a Christian community made up mostly of Jews, we think, because verse 32, the phrase the Lord's people, whom Peter was visiting, is literally the saints.

Now, while every Christian is a saint, I don't know if you realise that about yourself, if you're a Christian, you're a saint, so if your parents or your boss or someone accuses you of doing something wrong, you can say, oh, it wasn't me, I'm a saint.

But originally that phrase, the saints, referred to God's first people, the Jews. And so this church is likely to be mostly Jews. But Peter meets a man who's probably a non-Jew, he has a Greek name, Aeneas.

And perhaps he's lying on his mat outside where the church met, that he might receive some help from the church. Because sadly, he's been paralysed for eight years.

This is no common cold. But then he is healed in verse 34, except who does Peter say heals him, verse 34? Jesus Christ.

- [7 : 44] Heals you. You see, Jesus still lives and gives life. After all, with no Centrelink or medical facilities back then to help Aeneas, he wouldn't have had much of a life.
- And so to heal him would have been to give him physical life again. Now, of course, Jesus does this through his apostle Peter, doesn't he?
- Jesus. But even the way Peter acts points us to Jesus. It's kind of like our kids point to their parents by the way they act. One of our kids did something the other day, and my wife said, you're just like your father.
- It wasn't meant as a compliment. But this child's actions pointed Michelle to me as the one who was really responsible. Well, here, Peter's actions point us to Jesus as the one who's really responsible.
- Because back in Luke chapter 5 on your screens, Jesus healed a paralyzed man saying, get up, take up your mat. And he got up immediately.
- [8 : 56] Well, here in Acts, Peter says, get up, roll up your mat. And he gets up immediately. Peter acts like Jesus, doesn't he?
- And in doing so points us to Jesus as the one who's really responsible. Verse 34, who really heals, gives life. You see, Jesus still lives and gives life.
- But this physical life is meant to point us to life eternal. After all, when Jesus healed the paralyzed man back in Luke, it was to point to his power to forgive sins.
- to raise us to life eternal with God spiritually now, where he's our father in heaven. Well, so too here in Acts chapter 9.
- And we can know this because verse 34 literally says on your screens, and there's Jesus Christ heals you, rise, make your mat yourself, and immediately he rose.
- [10 : 04] Now, this word rise is the same word Luke uses to describe Jesus rising from the dead to life eternal, if you like. And so the repetition of rise here suggests that something more than physical life is on view.
- It points us to Jesus who has power to forgive sins and to raise us to eternal life spiritually with God. But the bigger point is it's Jesus who does this.
- And so verse 35, look who the people turn to. Verse 35, all those who lived in Lydda and Sharon saw the man, the paralyzed man, and turned to the Lord Jesus.
- They don't turn to Peter, but to the Lord Jesus, you see. For it's Jesus who still lives and gives life in Lydda. And, point two, in Joppa.
- So have a look at 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.
- [11 : 14] 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.
- So on your screens is that map again. So if Peter's moved from Lydda there, you can see up towards the coast of Joppa, where the city was. It's where Jonah fled to in the Old Testament, you might remember, and it's still an important coastal city in Israel today.
- Though today it's known by its Arabic name, Jaffa, which sounds yummy, doesn't it? Here is a photo of it on your screens. Sorry, I know, such a dad joke, I couldn't resist.
- Here's a proper photo of Jaffa the city, and it's quite beautiful, isn't it? Now, while the city is a Jewish city, even in Peter's day, there were still a lot of Greeks or non-Jews there, which explains why Tabitha was also known by her Greek name, Dorcas.
- I think I would have preferred Tabitha. But it's not unusual to have two names, even in our church today, people have two names. Some people have a Persian name and an English name.

[12 : 34] Others have a Chinese name and an English name. And depending on which community they are mixing with, depends on which name they go by. But here, Tabitha was an outstanding woman.

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 instead place her in an upstairs room, probably in her own home. And then they summoned Peter, and so verse 39 we read, 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.

And when Peter arrives, he's confronted by weeping widows, isn't he? Death is heartbreaking. But it's interesting, it's only the widows crying, perhaps because Tabitha was one of them and so closest with them.

[13 : 45] Or perhaps because these people didn't think Peter could do anything. And they were right. Peter can't, but Jesus can.

Because what does Peter do next? Well, verse 40, Peter sent them all out of the room. Then he got down on his knees and prayed. Like we heard in our first reading, Elijah prayed to God because he knew only God could raise the dead.

And so do he Peter prays. For he knows it's not him who has any power to give life. It's Jesus. And so after praying we read in the rest of verse 40.

Turning toward the dead woman Peter 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. Tabitha who was once dead is now alive and everyone can see it.

[14 : 56] You see Jesus still lives and gives life. Of course like before it's through his apostle Peter isn't it? But again like before Peter's actions point us to Jesus as the one who's really responsible.

Not only does he pray but his miracle reminds us of one of Jesus's. Remember raising Jairus' dead daughter?

So on the screens have a look at the comparison between the two events. Jairus urged Jesus just as they urged Peter. When Jesus arrived at Jairus' house all the people were weeping.

When Peter arrives all the widows were weeping. In Mark's account Jesus puts 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 come because the word for little child is Talitha which looks a whole lot like Tabitha doesn't it?

[16 : 04] Only one letter difference. There's too many similarities and parallels for this to be a coincidence. Peter's words and actions rather point us to Jesus as the one who's really responsible.

The one who still lives and gives life even from death. Which means he really can give us life eternal. Not just spiritually now with God such that he's our father and when we die our souls don't die but actually go to be with God in heaven.

Not just spiritual life but even physical eternal life. On the last day when he raises our bodies to enjoy a COVID-free creation.

In fact on your screens again the verse literally uses the word rise twice again. You see Luke's point?

Jesus still lives and gives life eternal. And so again people believe not in Peter but in Jesus. Have a look at verse 42.

[17 : 16] This became known all over Joppa and many people believed in the Lord Jesus. And in doing so these people received life eternal.

If you're listening in today we're very glad that you are but if you're listening in and you are not sure you have life eternal then can I encourage you to do what these people did turn to the Lord and believe in him.

Then you'll have new spiritual life with God now and the guarantee of new physical life later in a new creation.

But for us who already have life eternal then you see the lesson that Luke wants us to learn today he's repeated it hasn't he? 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. No they've died and long gone and there are no more apostles today and no matter what some churches say and we saw that there can't be any more apostles earlier in Acts when we looked at the criteria for an apostle.

[18 : 39] But there is still the apostles word in the Bible isn't there? And their word points us to Jesus as the one who's really responsible.

And it's through their word that Jesus gives life eternal. Now of course God can still give life physical. He can still grant healing and answer to our prayers.

Sometimes he does this through doctors or divine intervention. I've seen both happen. But remember even Peter's miracles were pointing us to Jesus and to life eternal.

That's the focus. And the way Jesus gives this life eternal in Melbourne today is through the apostles' word spoken by us.

At one of our parish council meetings recently we heard how some of our Chinese congregations have run evangelistic courses online where they share the apostles' word.

[19 : 40] And people have become Christians for real. They now have eternal life. Of course the Chinese pastors are just trying to work out how to baptize them now, socially distance.

You know maybe grabbing a bucket of water and splashing them from a distance, I don't know. Or two weeks ago we prayed for Cross and Crown, a church plant in Glen Waverley and one of their praise points was for someone who became a Christian even during COVID.

He now has eternal life. You see Jesus still lives and gives life, not just back in Lydda as people turned to him, nor back in Joppa when people believed in him, but here even in Melbourne during COVID as people hear of him.

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

In fact, there's a vaccine called the gospel, and there's bigger work that God is doing than dealing with COVID called growing his kingdom. We're to remember this bigger picture so we don't get bogged down by our current situation, but keep perspective, and are kept from neglecting God's work, or accidentally pushing against him.

[21 : 07] And second, we're to remember Luke's lesson here, that Jesus still lives and gives life, because that will give us confidence.

Confidence, firstly, that we're not alone when we're feeling fed up, or facing lockdown extension. In fact, I was talking with someone from our 9am service recently, who lives on their own in an aged care home, and is only allowed one visitor.

But when I asked how I could pray for her, this is what she said, 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 really is to have confidence to be part of God's work in the world, doing what we can to see the apostles' word go out to the ends of the earth.

Some people at our church worked with ESL here on Tuesday mornings, where the ends of the earth come to us, actually. And back in July, one of our members contacted me, this was during COVID of course, about getting a gospel tract to one of her Chinese students.

[22 : 36] And so we got a little tract together which summarised the apostles' teaching about Jesus, the gospel, and it was in Chinese so the student could read it easily. We got it to her via contactless delivery and all.

But the point is, our member was keen to do this because she remembers Jesus still lives and gives life and gave her confidence to do what she could to get the apostles' word about Jesus into the hands of this student so the student might hear and find life.

Or with Christmas approaching, we've already started working on how to help you invite people to hear the apostles' word about Jesus, which is not always easy, is it?

You know, your heart pounds and you're not sure how they're going to respond and so on. But for today, Luke's lesson is just to remember Jesus still lives and gives life so that when the time comes to invite, we can have confidence to have a go.

We can have confidence that we're not wasting our time even if they say no. For Jesus still lives and gives life. Let's pray.

[24 : 01] Our gracious heavenly father, we do thank you for reminding us today about the bigger picture that you are working in our world to see people forgiven of sin and saved from judgment, but rather have life eternal.

Help us to remember this bigger picture and help us to remember Luke's lesson for us today that Jesus still lives and gives life, that we might have confidence to be part of your work.

For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.