

He Lives

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[0 : 00] I was very impressed at the beginning of this service to hear such an enthusiastic response to the Lord is risen. You'd never know that it was nine o'clock service. You expressed the joy that Jesus gives to the world as you responded in that way.

And we should carry this over every Sunday, I think, because as Christians, at the center of who we are is this celebration because of what Jesus did today.

And it's very interesting, those words that you said so enthusiastically this morning have been said by at least a billion people today. And statistics say there's about two billion people who call themselves Christians, which may be nominally as well.

So it's safe to say that at least a billion people said what you said this morning. It's a very big day with deep meaning for many people. And in North America, where churchgoing is not as high, there is something a little bit different about this year as well.

Because I think as a culture, we have been a little bit better prepared for Easter than many Easter's. And it's because of this media phenomenon that has taken place since Ash Wednesday during the period of Lent.

[1 : 19] But during the last six weeks, over 30 million adults in Canada and in the U.S. have gone to see the movie called The Passion. It is a movie just about the last 12 hours of Jesus' life.

And it shows in a very graphic way the suffering that he went through. I don't know how many of you saw that movie. Raise your hand if you saw the movie The Passion.

That's a fairly high percentage. That's probably almost half of you. And we saw it as a staff at St. John's just after the movie came out. And at the end of the movie, there was a stunned silence, as there probably was when you saw the movie as well, if you saw it.

And people all stayed through the end of the credits. And it wasn't because the credits were particularly interesting. It was because people were thinking. And they were recovering, I think, from the intensity of the suffering on the screen.

It's very important for us, the group that went, to go out for coffee and debrief to talk about what we had seen. And I hope that you were able to do that as well, if you saw it.

[2 : 32] But since then, I've had many conversations with people about that movie. I think people wanted to debrief as well.

And one of the questions that's often asked is, why did Jesus have to die in that way? It looked like horrific, senseless suffering that was very hard to watch.

And many other people are thinking that question, too, probably. Because the cover of Time magazine this week has a large painting of Jesus walking on his way to the cross with a cross on his shoulder.

And there's the title of the magazine saying, Why did Jesus have to die? And I want to talk a little bit about that on this Easter day. Because the resurrection answers that question.

And there are three people particularly that I want to look at in John 20, 1-8. And you can look along on that in your service sheet. Because these three people are Mary and John and Peter.

[3 : 38] And they're thinking the exact same thing. Why did Jesus have to die in this way? In fact, their suffering is perhaps a bit worse than ours, having watched a film like that, is that they had deep personal grief with it.

And so in the first two verses, we meet Mary and Peter and John, who are very close friends, who loved Jesus dearly. And they saw Jesus suffer and death.

They saw what looked like senseless suffering. But for these three who were absolutely shattered and heavy with grief, there is a transformation that takes place in this chapter, chapter 20.

Because their tears are turned to joy. And the emptiness that was inside of them is filled with this true hope, with this incredible understanding that Jesus was alive.

Because they saw him. Their question was answered. Jesus' death had meaning. And that's what we're talking about today on Easter.

[4 : 46] In that movie, The Passion, there is a graphic, almost overpowering description of what Jesus went through, of the worst kind of human evil. And most of it is historically accurate.

But there were three points in that movie, which was hard to watch. But there were three points in the movie that filled me with hope. They were like lights that came in to the middle of all the darkness.

And the first moment was when the movie opened. The movie opens with a black screen and white letters. And the words are from the prophet Isaiah, who spoke 700 years before Jesus.

And the words are this. But he was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. The punishment that brought us peace was upon him.

And by his wounds, we are healed. And the wonderful thing about starting the movie that way is that all the suffering is put into context.

[5 : 50] He was crushed for our sin. Somehow Jesus suffered and died in our place. Somehow the punishment that humans deserved was upon Jesus.

And the benefit of his suffering and his death comes to us. It brings us peace. And by his wounds, we are healed. And that wonderful truth, that prophecy of Isaiah, only makes sense if you believe that in some way you and I participate in the evil in this world.

That somehow we are involved in rebellion against God. Mel Gibson understood that about his own life. He went to the depths of human experience and saw himself as one who had sinned.

And he was very influenced by the reflections of a nun back in the 18th century who reflected on all of this suffering that took place in Jesus' life.

And she said, And she said, Among the sins of the world which Jesus took upon himself, I saw also my own. And a stream in which I distinctly beheld each of my faults appeared to flow towards me from out of the temptations with which he was encircled.

[7 : 10] And you know that Mel Gibson was accused of making an anti-Semitic film. And he stresses when people say that, that each of us is responsible for Christ's crucifixion.

So he says, For culpability, Gibson told a group of religious leaders last fall, Look to yourself. I look to myself. And you see, what he understands clearly is that he has a spiritual problem that is deep if Jesus doesn't die for him.

And the Bible does say, Look to yourself. Because in many ways, Jesus' death is very personal to each of us. That simple sentence that starts the movie tells us that Jesus takes and he gives.

He takes each of our sins, as well as the sins of the world, on himself. And that's why his death is so horrific. Sin is seen in all its awfulness.

But then he turns and he gives to you peace and healing through his suffering. Peace with God.

And so Mel Gibson said, My wounds had to be healed by his wounds.

[8 : 25] You see, there's meaning of the suffering that brings us hope and sense to it all. Now there's a second point in the movie, right in the middle, that it's in the middle of all the suffering that takes place.

And in that scene, Pilate asks Jesus a question. He tells him basically, Look, you can stop all of this stuff that's happening to you if you just speak up in your defense.

And he asks this question, Don't you realize, Jesus, that I have the power to either free you or crucify you? And Jesus answered this, You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above.

And that line comes as a shock as you watch this. Because as you're going through it, you're thinking, Things are out of control.

Unjust people are in charge of the situation. And Jesus is suffering as a defenseless person. But Jesus said God was in control of that awful situation.

[9 : 33] He was doing something about this suffering and this death. And Jesus chose to obey God, his Father. Out of a deep love for his Father and a deep love for us, Jesus goes through this suffering and this death.

And that's why the night when he was talking to his disciples before he died, he told them, You know, no greater love has anyone than that they give their life for a friend.

And what Jesus is doing here is he is surrendering himself to the Father's will in order to bring an atoning sacrifice for the sins of the human race.

He is laying his life down for us. And this idea is not something that was new. Because way back in Moses' time, the Bible taught about a system of sacrificing various animals from lambs to cattle to show how awful sin was and to temporarily deal with the awful result of sin and to bring people at one with God.

It's the same spelling as atone. It's to show that people need to be brought at one with God. And so way back in Moses' time, God says, The life of the flesh is in the blood and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls.

[11:00] For it is the blood that makes atonement by reason of the life. And you see what's happening here in Jesus' passion is that he fulfilled for once and all in his suffering and death all that is needed to make us at one with God.

And that's why John the Baptist at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry said, Look, there is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

And we're going to sing about that in our communion. O Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world. And we will say in that communion as we pray that Jesus is the one perfect sacrifice for the sins of the whole world.

You see, Jesus chooses in this suffering and death to bring us the forgiveness of sins and peace with God. Well, how do we know that this was accomplished?

How do we know he fulfilled all this? Well, this brings us to the third great scene of hope I found in that movie. And that is the very end a massive stone that is in front of the door of Jesus' tomb is rolled away.

[12:18] And you see the light sort of slowly coming in. It's a beautiful scene. And we see the grave clothes flatten because Jesus' body is no longer there.

And then the camera pans over and we see Jesus risen from the dead. And you see the scars of the nails on his hands and on his body.

And here we have the reason for Christianity. If that did not happen, if Jesus did not go through death and rise again, then everything about Jesus and who he is falls apart and means nothing. But in fact, Jesus did rise from the dead. That's why we're gathered here with a billion people today. This is what Easter is about. Jesus is triumphant.

He has won. He has conquered sin and death. He is God. And he is alive. It proves that he accomplished what the Old Testament prophets and he himself said he would accomplish.

[13:25] And today we are called to believe that. God wants us to know this fact because it is the event that changes the world. And it changes your life and your future forever.

I love the way that the children talked about the resurrection. They have faith. The first thing they said about it is that it's about the forgiveness of sins. The second thing they said is it saves souls and it gives you eternal life.

And so if you look at the reading from John, you will see that that change takes place in Mary, Peter, and John. They begin being deeply distressed and they're running to the tomb in a panic because they're not just distressed that Jesus died but because somebody, it appears, has stolen his body.

And it says that Peter and John walk in, in verse 7, to an empty tomb and in it they see linen clothes that wrapped the body lying where the body was supposed to be.

And the cloth that had been around Jesus' head is rolled up by itself. And there the truth dawned on him, on them. If his body was stolen, that stuff would have been just taken with the body.

[14:40] That's what he was wrapped in. But they saw those pieces of cloth and they began to realize that Jesus was in charge of his own death and that Jesus was alive.

They didn't know what to do about that. I mean, I don't know if you and I would either if that started dawning on us. And it says in the next verses that they went back home.

They went back home and they just waited to see what would happen next. And we find out that in verse 20, which isn't on your sheet, that they actually do see Jesus.

Jesus comes, he's with them, and in a classic understatement, it says the disciples were glad. Well, it should be saying they were in ecstasy.

They were brimming over with joy. Their life was turned upside down. This incredible change only because of the event of the resurrection.

[15 : 41] And you see this probably in a more dramatic way in Mary's encounter. And that's a wonderful thing to read. It's beginning in verse 11. And we see in verse 11 that Mary goes into the same tomb, the empty tomb.

And there's two angels there, and they ask her, why are you crying? And she tells them that somebody has stolen the body. And she has nowhere to go to grieve and to remember who Jesus was.

And then in verse 14, we read this. Saying this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing. But she did not know it was Jesus. And Jesus said to her, woman, why are you weeping?

Whom do you seek? And supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him and I will take him away.

And at this point, Jesus said to her one word. She said to her, Mary. And that word changed her life forever.

[16 : 48] Forever. In that most personal word, Jesus told her, I am alive. Death and suffering cannot have the last word.

And that's why in that moment, Mary had faith. She believed. She saw and believed. And she poured all her love and hope and joy into that one word which John captures in the Aramaic, Rabboni, which means teacher.

And she embraced him. Her world is changed upside down. Her joy fills her. And then Jesus gives her a task in verse 17.

He says, don't hold on to me. This is a key verse in this whole section. Don't hold on to me for I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brethren, that's the other disciples, and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and to your God.

Those are powerful words because Jesus' message to them is that a new relationship has been established by his atoning death and his rising from the dead.

[18 : 00] Jesus is saying, you, Mary, and the disciples have the same access to the Father that Jesus does. He tells them, my Father is your Father. My God is your God.

The resurrection means that Jesus brings them to God. And that's the Christian message ever since. That's the message for us today, that Jesus brings us to God.

He is alive and has the authority to do it. And I wonder whether you are a bit like Mary or Peter or John this morning.

Perhaps because of big events that are in your life, you may feel that Jesus is not in control, that he is gone, that you suffered grief or pain perhaps, as they did.

But the Bible and eyewitnesses say that Jesus is risen. And in fact, in the most personal way, he is calling you. He is calling you by name.

[19 : 05] And he is telling you that he is King of Kings and Lord of Lords. And that he brings you to God. He is the one who rescues you by the forgiveness of your sins.

He is the one who brings you to God the Father so that you have peace with God. And you will know him, as the children said, for eternity.

And that truly will change your life. Recently, a member of our parish family died. And many of you knew him.

It was Ted McPhee. And he had many deep challenges in his life. He suffered medically over the past few years. But he knew Jesus was alive throughout his whole life.

He prayed to him and lived for him. He was a remarkable man. When he was confined to his home, he still made an extraordinary difference in people's lives all over the world, literally.

[20 : 08] And on Wednesday, we had a funeral. And it wasn't a funeral as is traditionally thought. It was glorious. It was joyful. And it was healing.

And it was that way only because of Jesus' resurrection. You see, Jesus brought Ted to God and made his life what it was. And that's what we were celebrating.

Throughout his life, he knew that Jesus' father was his father and that Jesus' God was his God. And just as Jesus passed through death and rose again, in his great love, he took Ted through death to eternal life in his presence.

That funeral is a sign of what our lives ought to be, the joy of the resurrection permeating everything about us. and I want to close by saying that we started with a question.

It was a question that said, why did Jesus suffer and die? And I saw the answer in that funeral. Very simply, it was to bring us to God forever.

[21 : 23] And Jesus passed through death into life to prove it. That is the truth that Mary and Peter and John saw. That is the truth that changed their life forever.

It is the worldwide offer of forgiveness of sin. But it is also a deeply personal offer to us as well. Because Jesus calls you and he calls me by name to believe what Jesus has done for us and to receive his healing and his peace.

May we know the risen Lord in this way. God grant us open spiritual eyes to see him. Amen. Amen. Thank you.