

# Two Miracles

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[ 0 : 00 ] Let's pray as we stand. Lord Jesus Christ, you are alive forevermore and you are present with us and we ask that you would fill our hearts with joy, that all the things that we do might begin and continue and finish with this great Alleluia.

We ask in your name. Amen. Our Bible reading today records the last resurrection or appearance of Jesus in the New Testament some 60 years after Jesus had died and risen from the dead.

It is to the Apostle John who has been exiled to an island called Patmos for a long career of preaching this Christian message and there one Sunday morning the risen Jesus appears from heaven and we read these words.

When I saw him I fell at his feet as though dead but he laid his right hand upon me saying Fear not. I am the first and the last and the living one. I died and behold I am alive forevermore and I have the keys of death and Hades.

[ 1 : 34 ] And you might think it's a little bit of a strange and extreme reaction for John to fall at his feet and worship him as though dead. That's not what you usually do with a religious teacher but it is of course what you do when you encounter God.

Do you remember in the Old Testament the prophet Isaiah was given a vision of God one day in the temple and his first response was not this is just fantastic.

This is the closest thing to a real spiritual experience I'm having. This is the high point of my life. It was exactly the opposite. He said woe is me.

I am ruined. I am completely lost. The sheer majesty and beauty and presence of the living God the creator and Lord of the ends of the earth appeared to Isaiah.

It was not the high point of his life but the low point and it threatened to take his very life away because the moment he came face to face with the living God he was instantly very self-conscious about his own darkness and the infinite chasm that separates us from God.

[ 2 : 51 ] You may remember in the New Testament the apostle Peter had a similar kind of experience. Jesus had been using his boat as a pulpit to a crowd.

Very creative thing to do. When Jesus finished preaching Peter said sail out to the deep let down your nets you're going to catch some fish. And this was a great problem for Peter.

He didn't know Jesus very well. He knew he was a religious teacher and he knew he could do some miracles but fishing, fishing was Peter's area of expertise. Preaching was Jesus' business.

Fish, that's what Peter knew. So he politely says to Jesus Master we have toiled all night and we have caught nothing.

He says I know how fish work. There are no fish out there. I've been doing it for years. You stay with the teaching. I'll stay with the fishing. It's a wonderful picture you see of how we compartmentalise Jesus.

[ 3 : 50 ] Jesus couldn't possibly understand the complexity of my life. However, Peter in an act of graciousness lets down the nets and instantly the nets are so full they start to break.

They pull them up in the boat and the boat starts to sink. And again, Peter doesn't say this is great. I'm loving this. This is the high point of my fishing career.

He gets a glimpse of who Jesus really is and he falls on his knees in the sinking boat and he says depart from me Lord. I'm a sinful man.

So here is the Apostle John. He's the last Apostle alive. A distinguished career. He knew who Jesus was and here Jesus appears to him from heaven in absolute dazzling majesty.

Did you listen as it was read? Clothed in the power of God. With eyes of flaming fire penetrating our thoughts and our hearts. With feet of bronze and power.

[ 4 : 53 ] A voice like thunder. And a face shining like brighter than the sun at noonday. It's no wonder John fell down as though dead. And then something very wonderful happens.

The risen Jesus reaches down with his hand and touches Peter and says to him, Fear not. Do not be afraid. It's a very important word for us today.

That the one who is, who rose from the dead, the one who is alive forevermore, stands amongst us this morning and he says to us, Fear not. And we say, Why not?

And Jesus gives two reasons to John and two reasons to us. And the first has to do with the miracle of his death. Because as we gather this morning, we celebrate two miracles for the price of one.

The first miracle is his death. Jesus says to John, Fear not. I died. Now from one perspective, the fact that Jesus experienced death on our behalf is very encouraging.

[ 5 : 59 ] And of course, this is one of the things that makes Jesus entirely unique. He is the only person who has experienced death right to the bottom and then been raised again to life.

And what a fearful death it was. Betrayed by a friend, abandoned by his followers, arrested in the dark of night by a mob, dragged to an illegal gathering of clergy who hated him.

And through the night, the clergy gathered all these witnesses who told all kinds of lies about Jesus.

And finally, close to the light of morning, the high priest who couldn't take it anymore, screams out, He is a blasphemer.

And it unleashes this violence against Jesus. And the clergy beat him and whack him and punch him and spit on him and mock him and abuse him. And they take him to the Roman governor, to Pilate, who in an act of moral cowardice, hands him over to the Praetorian guard.

But first, he has him flogged. And when he gets to the Praetorian guard, they plait together a crown of thorns and they put it on his head.

[ 7 : 09 ] And then they take a long stick and they repeatedly whack him on his head. And barely alive, they drag him out and crucify him. I have not seen Mel Gibson's film, The Passion.

I know many of you have, and many of you have been very moved by it. I can't do it. I can't bring myself to see it. But it does, I understand, bring home some of the brutal and degrading and fearful nature of the death of Jesus.

For all its barbarity, I think we need to say to each other and be truthful together today, that there are many people who have died terrible and barbaric deaths like Jesus. It's not so much his physical suffering that makes his death unique.

There is a whole other dimension to the death of Jesus, which is not present in the death of any other human being. This is what Bach is going at in the Cantata.

Let me put it most simply, that this one who dies is the Son of God. You see, if you read through the Gospels, and I encourage you to do so, you will see this man, Jesus Christ, who has power over nature, who has power over sickness, and he even has power over death.

[ 8 : 25 ] Three times, we see him raising people who have died, back to this life. And the obvious question is, how can a man, who can walk to Lazarus' tomb, and call him back from the dead, after he's been dead for four days, how can this man die?

How can the man, who claims to be the resurrection, and the life, submit to death? How can the one, who was supposed to be there at creation, and to be the judge at the end of the earth, how can he have his life taken away?

And I think this is part of the point, of this Cantata. It's one of the most beautiful, and early Cantatas, this number four. Bach wrote this, when he was, before he was 22, which is slightly discouraging.

But if you're 21 and under, there's still time for you. So get busy. But there is this sense of amazement, that Christ lay, it starts right at the beginning, Christ lay in death's cold prison, in death's bars, in death's chains.

And the amazement is, how can this be possible? And the answer that the Bible gives us, is that Jesus chose to die. That he, in his death, bears our sins.

[ 9 : 50 ] He somehow stands, in our place. That's why in the Garden of Gethsemane, he prays to God the Father, and he says, look, if there's any, if there's any way, that this cup can be taken from me, please do it.

And as he dies on the cross, the sun disappears for three hours, as all heaven turns its back on Jesus, and Jesus becomes sin for us.

This is the first miracle of Easter, that the eternal Son of God, should die for us. And that is what Jesus, in this resurrection appearance, says to John.

He says, I am the first, I am the last, I am the living one. Behold, I died. I am the first and the last, he says.

Before I came into this world, in Bethlehem, I was. I was there before creation. There was never a time, when the Son of God was not. And that eternal life, which he is the source of, was interrupted, by the experience of death, it is a miracle, beyond comprehension, the eternal Son of God, should die for us.

[11:03] But there is a second miracle, and that is the resurrection. Fear not, says Jesus, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, but I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys, of death and Hades.

Very difficult for us, to catch the power, of these words today. These are words, that no other person, has the right to say. And as Jesus, appears to John, he does not spend any time, dealing with the evidence, of his resurrection.

He has done that. He did that after, for 40 days, after he rose from the dead. They are now, they have entered the public record, there is historical evidence. Although many people, still have a great deal, of difficulty with it.

Not the least, are theologians. This week, retired theologian, John Dominic Crossan, who is perhaps, not retired enough, said this. Sorry, I shouldn't say, things like that.

I do not think, anyone, anywhere, at any time, brings dead people, back to life. And Jesus would say, that is absolutely right. Crossan's solution, of course, is because, these things just, don't happen.

[12:16] It was just, a spiritual thing, not the real thing. Well, this week, in the Vancouver Sun, there was an editorial, and I, if you had a part in this, you can come and talk to me later.

But, the heading of the editorial, was, Easter, braids, many colourful strands, of spirituality, and splendour. And, what it does, is it wants to dissolve, the reality of the resurrection, into a kind of sappy sea, of happy and good feeling.

And, it points out, that a number of different religions, celebrate certain things, on this weekend. And then, the author, seeks to, try some high prose. And I quote, Easter, it's the time of pussy willows.

It's the first chorus, of spring peepers. Life is good, Easter reminds us. And, Jesus says, I am the first, and the last, and the living one, I died.

Look, I am alive forevermore. It is a miracle, of such stunning proportion. It's very difficult, to believe. None of the disciples, believed it was going to happen, even though Jesus, repeatedly told them.

[13:30] And, I think this explains, why the angels, are so nonplussed, when the women, go to the tomb, on that first resurrection morning, to finish the burial process. You remember, what the angels say? What are you doing here, looking for the living, amongst the dead?

Didn't you hear, anything he said to you? He's risen. Now go and tell the others. These human beings, they just don't rise, from the dead. The great ones, of this world die.

Moses, is dead. Buddha, is dead. Muhammad, is dead. But, Jesus Christ, has risen. There is nothing, more important, that has ever happened.

And, there is nothing, that is, that means more, for us, today. And, in these words, Jesus chooses, just one thing, to show us, about his, about his resurrection.

He says, I have the keys, of death, and Hades. And, Hades is a term, to refer to the whole realm, of death. Jesus does not just, have the key, to death and dying, but to all those, who have passed on, and who have died.

[14:36] Death, and Hades, Jesus says, are like closed doors, to every human being. You are locked out. They are barred. None of us, can open those doors.

And when we move, through those doors, we have no power, to return. They close, with absolute, finality. And, here is the miracle, of the resurrection.

That God raised, Jesus from the dead, not just because, of how precious he was. Not just because, of what Jesus did, on the cross. It was to give, to Jesus, the keys, of death, and Hades.

It was to give, to him, all authority, in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, so that he could open, the doors of life, to us. His resurrection, is not, a one off.

It is an open door. It is the beginning, of a new thing, kingdom of heaven, for all, who believe, in him. He alone, has the keys, of death, and Hades.

[ 15 : 38 ] Jesus Christ, alone, has authority, over those, who have died. And he opens, that door, and when we die, it is him, whom we will face.

That is the point, of the resurrection. And in these, days, of great busyness, for all of us, and anxiety, there is one, who stands among us, who holds the keys, of death, and Hades.

And he says, to us this morning, fear not. Do not be afraid. He says, bring your fears, to my resurrection power. Begin to see, I left heaven, out of love.

I lived and I died, out of love. And I have now, opened the door, of heaven. We have nothing, to fear, if our faith, is in him.

We have nothing, to fear, if we belong, to him. If we have turned, to him. If we claim him, as our Lord. If we know him. It is if we do not know him, that we have everything, to fear.

[ 16 : 48 ] I think we saw, something of that, this week, didn't we? With the wonderful, rescue, of the University, UBC student, Graham McMinn, from his kidnappers, a brilliant operation, by the Vancouver police.

And when Graham, returned to Police Central, the day of his rescue, to thank, all those, police, who had rescued him, for giving him, his life back, I understand, there was not a dry eye, in the house.

Captured at gunpoint, blindfolded, for two days, kept for a week. One of the most, remarkable things, that he said, was this. He said, after some time, I gave up, on the police.

I gave up, on the hope, of being rescued. And then he said, and I quote, I am so glad, they did not give up, on me. And some of you, may have given up, on God.

And the great, good news of Easter, is that he has not, given up, on you. You see, the Bible says, we are held, hostage.

[ 17 : 51 ] We have been taken, possession, as Bach said, this morning, by our fears, and by our sins. We are held, captive by death. And we willingly, abandon the Father's house, for this captivity.

And we blindfold, ourselves, with our own, monumental, self-absorption. And we gradually, get used, to the blindness, because we don't, we don't want to believe, it could be, any different.

And we give up, on the rescue. And this morning, Jesus Christ, comes to us, and he says, fear not. I died, I am alive, forevermore, and I have the keys, of death, and Hades.

He has opened the door, and he invites us, to trust him, and to take him, by the hand. That is what we are, doing here today. Two miracles, for the price of one.

Impossible, for the eternal, son of God, to die, he dies. Impossible, for a man, to be raised, from the dead, he is raised. I died, and now I am alive, forevermore, and I have the keys, of death, and Hades.

[ 19 : 01 ] And here is the simple, invitation from these words, that we come to him, that we bring our fears, to him, that we turn to him, that we trust, in him. He's the first, he's the last, he stands before our lives, he will stand after our lives.

And this morning, in just a few moments, you'll be invited, to come forward, to receive the bread, and the wine, which are a reminder, of his death for us, and of his eternal, living life, and resurrection.

And that he's opened, the door of the kingdom, of heaven. And they are a reminder, to us, that he has not given up, on you. Indeed, he gave himself up, for you. Do not be afraid, commit yourself, to him, the first, and the last, the eternal son, the saviour, even Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Amen. Now let's kneel, for prayer.