

Do Not Be Afraid

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Preacher: Canon David Short

[0 : 00] Our Lord and God, we pray now that we would hear your voice and your words, that we would experience your presence and that we would see your face and receive from you this precious gift of risen resurrection life.

For we pray this in your son's name. Amen. I add my welcome to Dan's. Great to see you on this Easter morning 2018.

And I want to, we're going to look together at this account of the resurrection. It's back in your leaflet on page 5, Matthew 28. And I draw your attention to the words in verse 18, about five lines from the bottom, where Jesus came to the disciples and said to them, all authority in heaven and earth has been given to me.

All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. And you might be tempted to think, how on earth is that good news for me? I mean, as John was saying, it just confirms the worst stereotypes about Christianity, doesn't it?

That it's all about the rules and commandments. Christianity is just another form of oppression and tyranny. I mean, it's bad news for my freedoms and rights.

[1 : 29] You wretched Christians, you just suckle the fun out of life. All authority. Let me make it a little bit worse for you. Just look carefully again at those words. Jesus says, all authority in heaven and on earth have been given to me.

If it's all authority on earth, it means that Jesus Christ has the last word on everything. So he is the last word on computer coding, on architecture, on law, on science, on design, on management, on governance, on politics.

There is no one higher. He's saying, all authority on earth has been given to me. He is supreme over everyone who you look to as an authority in your life, everyone you trust.

He says, I have the right to tell you where to go, what to do and what to think. Let me make it worse. Then he says in verse 19, go therefore and make disciples of all nations.

He says, my authority extends right around this, what is it, the round globe we sang in that verse? Every nation, every people, every language, every religion. And he says, the work of someone who follows me is to make disciples of all nations.

[2 : 45] In other words, he looks around the world at every belief and every nation and he says, they're mine, they belong to me. All authority has been given to me on earth and in heaven over evil, over powers, over death itself.

And the question is, how can this be good news for us, Easter 2018? I think it's so hard to imagine how it can be good news because all our experience of power and authority is mixed with corruption and exploitation and manipulation, exploiting others for my advantage.

And if you give all authority to someone, isn't that instantly going to set you into a tyranny? And I think our instinctive recoil from these words of Jesus is completely understandable.

And it's understandable because of how badly power and authority have been misused to abuse others. Example, you may not be aware, but Australia this week is in shock, turmoil and soul searching.

Some of the most highly regarded and highly paid stars in the Australian culture, who are on the top rung of the Aussie pedestal, almost on a religious level, were caught on videotape cheating.

[4 : 02] Cheating. I'm talking about the Australian cricket team. They were playing South Africa and with the knowledge of the vice captain and the captain and likely the coach, one of the young bowlers, had a little piece of sandpaper.

And each time he got the ball, he'd rub the side of the ball so that the ball moves in the air, it makes it more difficult to hit. It's just, it's classic old-fashioned cheating. And I've watched all the tear-filled

press, you know, statements and apologies from these guys.

And you know what they say? Mistakes were made. And we were disappointed. Steve Smith, the captain, is probably disappointed because he's going to lose \$5 million out of this.

The coach was sacked. He said, I'm not, no, no, no, I'm not going to be. Then he was sacked and at his final press conference he said, I just want you all to know these young cricket men, they're not bad people.

I'm sure you're all very glad to hear about that. You might think that's a storm in a teacup, but it's just a perfect, it's a perfect example of abusing trust and power and authority and cheating.

[5 : 17] And the first thing they all did in response to this was they tried to cover it up and lie about it. It's exactly what Volkswagen did. It's exactly what a number of banks have done.

It's precisely what Facebook did. It's what Harvey Weinstein and Kevin Spacey and thousands of others of serial abusers have done. Not to mention political leaders on the left and the right and in the middle.

So it's perfectly reasonable to be wary and even sceptical of grand claims to authority. It's understandable to confuse this sort of authority with tyranny.

And in response, some even say in our modern expressive individualist culture, I recognise no authority outside myself. But if you say that, just a moment's thought, you reflect on this for just a moment, you see how arrogant and how hypocritical that is.

It's completely arrogant because if you make yourself into the absolute authority, you're going to go down the track of Harvey Weinstein. And it's hypocritical because we constantly tell other people what we think they should be doing.

[6 : 28] And if we're not brave enough to say it, we still think it. So we're hypocrites. The most relaxed West Coast guy I know, he is a complete hypocrite on this. And even though I think it's hard to imagine why we should trust Jesus or how he could dare make this claim or how it could be good news for us, that is exactly what this passage does.

It invites us to see it's very good news. So I've got two points. Why it's good news. And secondly, how that becomes good news in our lives. Firstly, how is this good news for us?

How is Jesus having all authority good news? Well, the simple reason is the way Jesus uses his authority. What he does is he subverts, he turns upside down and reverses all our experience of authority.

And he does that by giving authority away. The word Jesus uses in verse 18 for authority means two things. It means the right and the freedom to be able to do anything.

And secondly, it means the power and the ability to do it. But in Matthew's context, Jesus' right and his ability are always used in love and always for the benefit of other people.

[7 : 48] He never exploits anyone. He never cheats. He never misuses another person or abuses or oppresses. He never does anything cruel. Exactly the opposite. I mean, I encourage you, read through the gospel from the beginning to the end because one of the first things that people notice about Jesus is exactly his authority.

They just can't seem to get over it. When he teaches the Sermon on the Mount, they come to the end of that and people say he teaches with authority. He heals people from disease.

Even has authority over death and brings some people back into this life. He has authority to forgive sins. And even his fiercest enemies at one stage say to him, where do you get the authority to do these things?

Let me give you just one illustration. For those of us who are here on Friday at the Good Friday Matthew service. In chapter 26, in the middle of his arrest, in the middle of the night, it's completely illegal.

Judas has betrayed Jesus for 30 pieces of silver and the religious leaders send out an armed posse in the middle of the night to grab him. And Peter takes out his sword, as you do.

[9 : 06] If you're a fisherman and you're a disciple of Jesus, you happen to have a sword. And he takes a wild swing and he takes off the ear of the high priest's servant.

What does Jesus do? He says to Peter, put your sword back in its place. Everyone who takes the sword will perish by the sword. He says, don't you think I can appeal to my father and he will at once send 144,000 angels?

That'll be enough, don't you think? And then Luke's gospel tells us, Jesus touches the servant's ear and he heals him. He restores him.

He makes him in the middle of his arrest. And we don't have this in the text, but I imagine the posse is saying to one another, that's not what we're expecting. And then he goes to the cross, not because he deserves it, not because he can't escape it, but he does it for us.

And remember last week, if you were here, we looked at the radical love of Jesus, taking our sins and our guilt on himself and paying the price so that we can be free and forgiven. That's how Jesus uses his power.

[10:16] That's how he uses his authority. It's to overthrow authority. He gives his life away so that we might live. It is the most radical love. It is humiliating love to save us and bring us back to God.

Alan Titchmarsh is a gardening superstar in England. They have gardening superstars in England. He's a very wealthy man and he's made a series of television programs for ITV where he goes to people who are struggling with terrible adversity and he builds for them a beautiful garden.

And he finds the Dean family, Trish, Malcolm and their nine-year-old boy. And two years prior to this, Malcolm, who was a big, strong, healthy garden lover, was diagnosed with motor neuron disease.

And he's now 48 and he's confined in a wheelchair and he can only communicate by one of those tablets that you look at with your eye. They've had to move out of their house to another house so that Trish can care for Malcolm full time.

And the backyard is an absolute mess. It's sloping, overgrown. You can't get the wheelchair up there. And Titchmarsh and the team send the family away and they build a garden for them.

[11:35] I mean, he hasn't got long to live. But they build a garden for them full of texture, full of colour, full of fragrance with a lawn and a sitting area. It is a massive amount of work.

And the family pays not one cent. But the thing that's so impressive about it is just how thoughtfully it's done. They do layers of beds in the favourite colours of this family.

They create a path where the wheelchair can go up to the back of the garden to a sitting area. And in the path they have pavers engraved with key dates in the family's life.

When they met, when they married, when they had their son. And at the back they have a two-storey tree house for the nine-year-old. And when the family comes and receives this, they hand a bat to him signed by his favourite cricket team.

And out of the shed they bring Trish's brother who lives in Spain. Now I know, yeah, it's moving.

And I know gardens are a luxury for many people.

[12:38] But it's just a wonderful illustration of how you can use your power and your authority, your right and your ability to do something wonderful, even life-changing for somebody else.

And Jesus doesn't just build us a garden which we can enjoy from a wheelchair and then pass away one day. He takes us back into the Garden of Eden, only this time in resurrection bodies that will never die.

Cleaned and pure from all corruption and all sin. Healed from every disease and weakness. With the power to enjoy life and friendship and to enjoy creation beyond our wildest dreams.

So when he says all authority in heaven and earth has been given to me, he's talking about this reversal of resurrection. You can't have a bigger reversal, can you, than resurrection? I mean, it gives you a power base that's unique in the universe.

I mean, if you're raised from the dead and you can give life to others, that's pretty impressive, isn't it? And if you have a risen life that nobody can take away from you, you just, I mean, no one can stand in your way.

[13:50] It's unimaginably good news. And incidentally, it's why Jesus in verse 19 says, from now on, Christians have a new name for God.

It's Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It's amazing. I mean, the Son of God should come from heaven for us and live for us and die for us to conquer death. And what that means is that our lives are in his hands.

Those hands that reached out and touched lepers and healed them. The hands that now have scars in them. This reversal means that everything he said about the kingdom of heaven is true. You know, blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like a child will be greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And if Jesus doesn't have all authority, what's the option?

Who are you going to give authority to? The cold fate of history? To your brilliantly successful career? You're going to give it to me? You're going to give it to yourself?

[14:53] You're going to give it to our political leaders? To the rule of law? Only Jesus has died for you and risen for you. It's only Jesus who's never used his power except to benefit us.

He's never used it to enrich himself or to cheat someone. He didn't come to die for himself. He didn't come to rise for himself. But he did it for us. And since God the Father has given him all authority, it means he is able to give us resurrection life without limit and forever.

Without limit and forever. And he calls us to trust him and to follow him. That's why it's good news. And that brings me briefly to the second point.

How does that become real for our lives? How do we respond to this? How has it become good news in our lives? And what Matthew does is he gives us two very different responses, very cleverly.

In the chapter, just in chapter 28 here, there are people who respond to Jesus' authority, who acknowledge his authority, and those who don't. And those who refuse Jesus' authority end up moving deeper and deeper into a web of lies as a kind of a spiritual death comes over them.

[16:12] Because if you don't make Jesus your authority, you have to make something else your authority. And anything else is going to drag you away from truth and life toward lies and death.

Those who do recognize his authority in this chapter, they're not heroes. They're very ordinary. But what happens is the resurrection changes their connection and their bond with Jesus.

He goes from being just a teacher to being their Lord. He goes from being the one they listen to to the one they worship. And he gives them something wildly full of life.

And he leads them to a promise, which I'm going to come to at the end of the sermon. So let's have a look at these two different groups. Firstly, the guards. The guards in the first paragraph of the chapter.

They are the picture of human authority. They were sent by the chief priests and Pharisees to guard the tomb. And they roll this massive stone in front of the tomb.

[17:11] And then they set a watch. Here is human power and authority. They have the backing of the governors. They have the backing of the lawyers. They have weapons, real weapons. They're in control.

How difficult could it be to keep a dead corpse dead? Right? Verse 2. Without them knowing or seeing the greatest miracle since creation takes place, Jesus rises from the dead unseen to them. And then in verse 2, a great big angel comes down from heaven, causes an earthquake, causes the ground to shake seismically. The word is. And he heaves off this massive rock.

And then he sits on it. And I want to preach a sermon just on that one day. I think it's a fantastic picture. And he does that so that the women can see into the tomb, not so Jesus can get out.

Verse 4. For fear of him, the guards trembled and became like dead men. And the word tremble is the same word for earthquake. They're having their own little private seismic event.

[18:14] They were trying to use all their power and authority to keep Jesus dead, just reversed by the resurrection. So they become like dead men. That's what happens when you resist Jesus' authority.

The resurrection shows the complete powerlessness and futility of all human power. And when they race off and report to the... When they're able to stand up, race back to the chief priests and Pharisees, you might think that these senior religious leaders would say to each other, you know, maybe we've got this wrong.

You know, these guys, they've seen an angel. We heard the angel, what he said to the women, that Jesus has risen from the dead. We need to find out the truth about this.

Let's set up a commission. But they don't. They do what the Australian cricket team did. They try and cover it up. And if you look at this in verses 12 and onwards, first they offer guards some money, probably 30 pieces of silver apiece, I don't know.

And then they concoct a lie, making the disciples out to be outrageous body snatchers. And the lie is so silly, it's almost funny. See verse 13? If anyone asks you what happened, tell them you're asleep on duty.

[19:30] And while you were asleep, Jesus' disciples came and stole the body away. That had a very big hole in it. A hole that you could march a legion through, I think. If you're asleep, how do you know what happened to the body?

And then the last reference to the guards is in verse 15. And they took the money and did as they were taught. They replaced the authority of Jesus, which they had first-hand knowledge of, with

self-serving and financial settlement.

They exchanged the glorious truth of the resurrection for just... It's a grubby lie, really. And they replaced the hope of life with the rule of death. But in contrast to them are the women and the disciples.

And the lovely thing as you watch the women and the disciples is that you don't find any grudging and reluctant, a sort of a formal seeding of authority over Jesus.

You have this joyful and spontaneous worship. We're seeing the good news. We see the good news of Jesus' authority in really mundane ways here and also in extraordinary and supernatural ways.

[20 : 40] And each time he meets with both the women and the disciples, he doesn't stop at worship, but then he includes the worshippers in something absolutely vast and crazy and then he makes a promise to them, which I think is heart-melting.

The women are given a place of special privilege on the day of resurrection, just as they were at the birth of Jesus at the beginning of this book. They go to the tomb. When they get there, the guards are shaking on the ground.

And they see the angel and they're very afraid. And they hear what the angel says, that Jesus has been raised. The angel says literally he has been raised out from among the corpses.

And then we read verse 8. So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy and ran to tell his disciples. And verse 9, And behold, that's...

Sorry, I've got to stop. This word behold doesn't really work today, does it? Any of you use the word behold? It is something shocking and surprising.

[21 : 44] And one of the commentators says, you should translate it, guess what? And guess what, says Matthew. He uses it six times in this chapter.

Guess what, verse 9. Jesus met them and said, Hello. It is the most ordinary greeting. Hello, he says.

And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshipped him. And worshipped him. It is the natural and spontaneous response to meeting the Lord of heaven and earth. And this word means they're not holding anything back.

There's no reserve. There's no... It's completely wholehearted recognition of the risen Lord. You know, if you draw a line and then you put on below the line, everything human, everything of this world, and you put above the line God and everything above, they say...

They recognize that Jesus is now above the line. He is clearly divine. And their worship is not just... It's not bowing before great muscle and genie mightiness.

[22 : 45] His power and his love and his grace and his goodness shows by them grabbing hold of his feet. This is... Here is an unbreakable bond of love. There's nothing formal about it.

It's a heart thing because it's a foot thing here. And they go off and they do exactly what Jesus tells them to do, which is why in verses 16 and 17, the male disciples finally gather in Galilee.

And in verse 17, we read, The word doubt here, it's not the usual word.

It's not a word for intellectual reservations, which is not necessarily wrong. It's the word to hesitate. There's something completely disorienting going on.

They're being overwhelmed in the presence of the one who gave his life and now has defeated death, who is the son of God. And worship and hesitation go together. They do in my experience. I mean, sometimes it's a sense of my own unworthiness.

[23 : 49] Sometimes I need the assurance of God's goodness and his love. Sometimes I'm just not sure how to respond. And do you know what Jesus does? In verse 18, he walks across the bridge of their hesitation to them.

You see verse 18, And Jesus came and said to them, We miss these little details. Jesus takes the initiative and steps over the bridge. He comes close to them and he says, All authority in heaven and earth have been given.

And he doesn't leave them in worship, you see. He gives them something wildly important and wildly impossible. He says, Go make disciples of all nations. And as they're reeling from that, He then finishes with this astounding promise.

This is the last phrase of the passage. He says, And behold, guess what? He says, He says, And you know what's at the heart of the new age, the resurrection of the age?

Right at the heart of that is that God will be with us. And we will be with him. And that's where the whole story has been going, right since the beginning of the Bible.

[25 : 18] We were made to be with him. And we turned away. We wrecked the garden. Remember at the beginning of Matthew, Jesus came to be God with us, Emmanuel.

Before his resurrection, his physical presence was limited geographically to one place. But now he promises his personal presence to every disciple all of every day.

Not just on certain holy days or holy places, but all of every day. His shelter, his protection, his presence. That's what he's saying. And that's what he uses his authority for.

No separation. Nothing can tear us from this love. Behold, I'm with you always to the end of the age. And so we worship him. And that's what we're doing here today.

So let's kneel and pray together.