Easter Sunday AM

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Date: 31 March 2024

Preacher: Canon David Short

[0:00] We ask now, O God, that we would hear the voice that spans the years, speaking life, stirring hope, bringing peace to us. Enlarge our hearts as we hear your word and grant to us to receive all the things you've got for us here.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Please be seated. And it would help if you turn back to Matthew 28 on page 835, because today we celebrate the absolute cornerstone and key to all Christian faith. All our hopes are founded on Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, and we believe that he rose the only one who's ever risen from the dead to defeat death and to drag death defeated behind him, proving all his words are true and giving to us this world and the world to come.
And as I speak this morning, just have a spare of thought for the choir. This is their second time through. But don't be too sad for them, because I find every time we go through this, there are more and more depths and details that are full of goodness and life.
And we just look at the detail of how he starts the chapter in verse 1, after the Sabbath toward the dawn of the first day of the week. He locates the resurrection in secular time on a certain day, in a certain place, at a certain hour.
[1:39] And it's not just secular time, it's more than that. This is the dawning of a new period. It's the dawning of a new creation, a new time. Since Jesus Christ has risen from the dead, the door to God is open in a way it hasn't been before, the door to hope, new life, and a new world.

And Matthew shows us what's going on here with great simplicity and depth. He doesn't describe the resurrection. Nowhere is the resurrection described, because it's beyond words to describe. But the way Matthew wants us to understand this is by the massive impact the resurrection has on all the different parties that are there that day. And we only have time for two this morning. Although there's no next service until 6pm. Just kidding. So, firstly then, the impact on Jesus' enemies.
And this begins in the last paragraph of the last chapter. And the way that Matthew explains the impact on the enemies is through a series of ironies.
[2:50] And the ironies are so sharp, they're almost funny. So let me just mention three ironies. The first one is, back in chapter 27 in the last paragraph, the enemies of Jesus, the ones who have succeeded in doing him to death, have a better grasp of Jesus' teaching than the disciples do.

It's almost as though they believe the words that Jesus said, that he will rise again. None of the disciples believed that Jesus would rise again, you remember.
And the idea that they invented this goes against all the evidence. So back in 27 verse 63 we read, Sir, they say to Pilate, Lord, they say.
We remember how that con man said while he was still alive, after three days I will rise. They got it right. Therefore order the tomb to be made secure until the third day.
Secure it. Lest his disciples go and steal him away and tell the people he's risen from the dead. And the last con job will be worse than the first. And they become unwittingly the first preachers of the gospel.
[3:56] Jesus Christ has risen from the dead. It is a horror to them. But they take the words of Jesus mighty seriously. And in doing this, in securing the tomb and putting the guard and securing the stone, they unwittingly end up serving the truth and proving the truth of the resurrection and serving God's purposes and not their own.

Their great concern is security. Three times they mention secure it, secure it, secure it. These are the ones with the power. They've won. Jesus is completely dead.
But they're still very insecure in the front of even the thought of the resurrection. So they get a guard of soldiers who secure the boulder, massive boulder, and they set a guard over the dead body so

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that nothing's going to happen.
And they're very specifically terrified that the puny disciples might come and steal the body and pretend that he's risen from the dead. So they remove any human possibility that the disciples could do it, which just serves to prove the reliability of the resurrection, because they just removed any explanation of the empty tomb.
That's the first irony. The second is in chapter 28, verses 2 to 4, and it's the response of the guards to the arrival of the angel.
[5:20] We begin with a huge earthquake, which in Matthew's gospel is always about the end times. An angel comes down from heaven, flicks away all their hard work in the massive boulder from the tomb and sits on it looking like lightning.

And in verse 4 we read, And the word tremble is exactly the same as earthquake.
So they have an earthquake and then each of them have a little manquake. They were there to keep the dead man dead, but with all their power and skill they couldn't do it. Instead we're told they become like dead men.
You see? Their world is turned upside down. The living and powerful ones become like dead men because the dead one has risen from the dead. Because the resurrection brings this complete reversal into our world.
All that we think is powerful and good, now powerless and weak. Death has been transformed into life. That's the second irony. And the third is in verse 11.
[6:29] And the guards now become the next preachers of the resurrection. The witnesses and preachers. You see, the guards, because they didn't keep the dead man dead, they're in big trouble.

So they raced back to the city. And in verse 11 we read, They told the chief priests all that had taken place. I would have loved to have been a fly on a wall and hear that conversation.
Wouldn't you? I mean, how would it have gone? How would the guards have explained to the chief priests what happened? Well, they would have said, you just won't believe this. We did exactly as you told us.
The stone was heavy and we concreted it in place, if they had concrete in those days. And then we felt this earthquake. And then we saw this angel come down from heaven.
And we knew he was a supernatural being because his face was like lightning. And he flicked away the stone, destroyed our all good work from the night before. And his face was like lightning.
[7:29] So we all fell down on the ground. It was the only thing we could do. We felt like we were going to die. We thought we were like dead men. And you know what? He ignored us. And he just sat on the rock and waited for the two women to come.

And he spoke to them. He told them not to be afraid, not us. And he said to them, he knew that they were after the man, Jesus, who was crucified.
And the angel said, he's not here because he's risen from the dead. And he invited them into the tomb to see that he wasn't there anymore. And after they left, we went into the tomb.
It's just what they said. There's nothing there except the grave clothes. No body. We've been guarding it all night. There's no human way he could have come out. Or something like that, right?
And you might think at this point when the guards told them all that had happened, the clergy might reconsider. You know, they might say to each other, well, you know, maybe there's something to this.
[8:27] Maybe we mightn't have it all right around this. Maybe there's something to Jesus and the resurrection. Perhaps we should do an investigation. They do not. Because all the evidence in the world will not change our minds if our hearts are decided against Jesus.

And so they invent a false narrative, an anti-gospel to hide the truth. And they come up with enough money to bribe the guards and corrupt the guards.
And a much bigger amount of money to keep Pilate happy so that he'll look the other way, which is Pilate's practice. This is how the city works. It's cash. It's lies.
It's corruption. And getting rid of Jesus is becoming a more and more expensive option for them. You know, 30 pieces of silver to Judas and now 30 pieces to each of the guards and then a big amount for Pilate.
I'm sorry. And what is their very brilliant anti-gospel? The disciples stole the body while we were asleep. And you imagine them going to court.

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[9:32] And the obvious question is, if you're asleep, how do you know the disciples stole the body away? And this is a word, I think, to all of us who are sceptical or unsure about Jesus and the resurrection.

I want to invite all of you to examine the evidence with an open heart. To see the promises of Jesus before his death about this. And then to look at the empty tomb. And then to track through the appearances of the risen Jesus and what he says.
And then the explosive birth and growth of the church. To be unafraid of this tremendous truth that Jesus Christ has risen from the dead. And then be ready for that turning upside down of your life.
Because the sad truth is that the resurrection of Jesus, if you're opposed to it, only moves us deeper and deeper into lies and incorruption. And can make us miss the chance for life and forgiveness.
And stepping into the light of the truth. And that's the effect of the resurrection on Jesus' enemies.
But secondly, we see the impact of the resurrection on Jesus' followers.
[10:42] This tracks right beside the hostility of those who hate Jesus. And Matthew shows us consistently the radical transformation that the resurrection makes in Jesus' followers' lives.

They are overwhelmed with a sense of loss and grief. They are overwhelmed with a sense of failure. They were the ones who ran away from him. And every time Jesus comes to them, he steps across their sense of grief and sorrow and failure.
With grace and love and kindness. And he holds out his hands to them and invites them to join him.
And that's the result of the resurrection for all of us.
So at the start of the chapter, there are only two disciples, two women, the two Marys, who'd been there at the death of Jesus. They'd been there at the burial. And now here they were three days later.
It's like the church is reduced to two. And when they arrive, they find this astonishing scene. The guards on the ground are shaking away. The tomb is open.
[11:48] The stone's rolled away. There's an angel sitting on it, shining with all the glory of God.
And you notice what the angel says to the women, how he speaks to them. He speaks about Jesus in very human terms.

No grand titles, the Lord of glory, the Son of God, the Christ. They simply say, you're seeking Jesus, the man who was crucified. I think the angels still are struggling.
They can never get over the fact that the Son of God was incarnate as a human. And so this is this very human note. You seek the man, Jesus, who was crucified.
But in the original, it means was and is and always eternally will be the crucified today and forever.
He is not here. He has risen.
Come and have a look for yourselves. It's the most exalted news. It's given in the most simple and ordinary way because I think he wants to keep our feet on the ground.
[12:48] And as soon as they hear this, he then tells them to go and tell the disciples that he has risen. He'll meet them in Galilee because part of the gift of the resurrection that we need to receive is that it makes us instantly responsible to pass it on to others.

Because the resurrection was not just for its own sake, but for all his followers. And it means that as soon as Jesus has risen from the dead, his plan is focused on us. He wants to meet the other disciples who are defeated and disheartened and discouraged.
And he wants to remake and reconstitute the church. And so the angel repeats the news in verse 7 and he adds to it, Jesus has risen. This time he says, from the dead.
And it's impossible to put into words the transformation that has taken place through this resurrection. For the first time in history, the iron grip of death has been broken from the inside out.
Someone who's stronger than death has gone through death to show he is stronger.
And it's exactly why the tomb is empty. It's to show it's a bodily resurrection. It's not a reincarnation.
It's not a resuscitation just to this life when he'll die later.
[14:02] Nor is it a ghostly spiritual thing. He has taken his body from the tomb. A transformed new eternal and spiritual body.

A physical and spiritual body. He hasn't left his humanity behind as a bad memory. Which I think is a great comfort to us. Because as believers, we don't have to overcome our humanity or leave it behind.

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God loves us as whole persons, souls and bodies. And when he takes us as his, he takes us entirely and he takes us forever. So they run with excitement and great joy.
The same great joy that was there with the Magi. And they're fearful as well. They're afraid it's too good to be true. And then in verses 9 and 10, Jesus himself appears to them.
Now, what are the risen Jesus' first words after his resurrection? You know the story of the Sunday school class where the teacher said that to the class.
[15:08] What did Jesus first, what was the first thing he said after he rose from the dead? A little girl at the back of the class said, ta-da! Well, in verse 9, he doesn't say that.

He says, he uses the most common street greeting in Greek. Still is. It's just the word, hello. Hello. In the old version, it is all hail.
It's kind of not like that. It's more like, hi there. There's no trumpet blast. There's no bow down. It's more than ordinary. Because Jesus is more than a human, but he's not less than a human.
And what interests him is the connection and the love of the women again. And they fall at his feet and they take hold of his feet and they worship him. And because they take hold of his feet, he's not a hallucination.
He's not a ghost. He's not a vision. And they worship him because he is God. And throughout the scriptures, and this has been emphasized again in Matthew's gospel, it is blasphemy for one human to worship another human.
[16:16] But here Jesus happily receives and welcomes their worship. This too is our true response to the resurrection. It's not just joy and relief, but it's to recognize that he is God in the flesh and worship him.

And that's what we're doing this morning. And he invites his disciples. He tells the women to invite the disciples to come see him in Galilee. But he doesn't call them his disciples.
Did you notice that? He calls them my brothers. My brothers. This is a really kind and lovely thing to say. It just oozes forgiveness.
Do you remember on the night when Jesus was betrayed, all the disciples were absolutely confident that they would remain steadfast with Jesus. And every single one of them abandoned him.
Remember that? And on the night of the betrayal, they all deserted him. And they're all feeling this sense of guilt and sorrow.
[17:20] And Jesus wants to relieve them of that crushing sense of guilt and sorrow. As he wants to relieve us of any sense of guilt or sorrow. And so he gives this word of encouragement and hope.

He calls them my brothers. And that means the resurrection is not just about the big issues of new life and new resurrection bodies. It's about the restoration of fellowship through forgiveness.
It's about the creation of a new people of acceptance and grace. Where we're not fixated on our own failures. And we're not fixated on the failures of those around us.
We're not complaining all the time. But we hear the word of forgiveness and the invitation from the risen Jesus to enter into being brothers and sisters with each other on the same grounds together.
If you're new to St. John's, you should know we all fail. We all fall. We often say in our welcome groups that St. John's is a very sinful group of people.
[18:23] We're glad to say that, actually. Because it means we're very forgiven. We've got one Lord, one Saviour, who's risen with one hope and grace for us all. And that's why when we come to verse 16, to the last paragraph, to the scene on the Mount of Galilee, where Jesus greets his disciples and gives them the great commission, there's a little bit of a nervous start to this in verse 16.

You see, it says the 11 disciples went to Galilee. They're not apostles. They're not the great leaders. They are the 11 disciples. They are the 11 failures.
They are the defective 11. All 11 defected from Jesus, the one who betrayed him, has committed suicide. I read this wonderful quote in a commentary this week.
The church that Jesus sends into the world is very 11-ish. Imperfect, fallible. Jesus uses this imperfect church to do his perfect work.
It's wonderful, isn't it? And then for the second time in this chapter, human beings bow and worship Jesus. It is the response to meeting the risen Jesus. Worship. Fully man.
[19:39] Fully God. God from God. Light from light. Very God from very God. And it is in the worship of the human Jesus that we meet God as he fully is. Which is why his humanity remains

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eternally important for us.

But even as they worship, we're told some doubt. Which I love this because we all struggle with doubt and worship at the same time, don't we?
There's something refreshing and realistic about this. That we're all believers and doubters. That we adore him, but we have lots of questions. But here is the astonishing grace of Jesus.
He doesn't tell them off. He doesn't give them a lecture how they should believe. He doesn't even address their doubts. He steps toward them in verse 18.
That word come is he steps toward them. And he reveals himself more clearly. He calls them to make disciples of all nations.
[20:41] Because in the end, the way doubts will be dealt with is not by being conquered intellectually. But the way doubts are dealt with is by obedience. It's only as we obey what Jesus says do we come to know God more fully.

And if you want to have all your questions answered before, you'll know God. You'll never know God. And what does Jesus say to these frail believers with divided hearts? Get your act together. Father, I can use you if you're 36% more obedient. He says, look to me. All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. Then he says, you go and make disciples of all nations.
Baptising them in the Christian name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He's not telling them to proselytise or preach, but invite people into the slow work of becoming disciples.
The educational process of learning Jesus. Now, I want to add a little section that wasn't there at the nine o'clock service because you're a much smarter looking congregation.
[21:46] Why does Matthew do it this way? Why does he give us these almost funny ironies about the enemies of Jesus?

And then this gracious reception of the resurrected Jesus to the friends of Jesus. And I think it is because the classical difference between tragedy and comedy.
I don't mean a barrel of laughs and I don't mean sad, sad, sad. But in literature from Aristotle to Dante, a tragedy is a story that shape goes like this.
There's all sorts of happy things going on. But in the end, the arc of the story goes down. It ends sad. Whereas a comedy might have all sorts of terrible things going on during the story.
But in the end, the arc of the story goes upward. And the resurrection of Jesus Christ means that life for believers is comedy.
[22:47] Because it ends with him and glory. And life in the city, which ignores Jesus, is tragedy. You know, it's pumpkin lattes and holidays at the sea.

But then they die. The resurrection means that life is a comedy. And I think we're meant to ask at this point in the story, just who does Jesus think he is?
And the answer is he's the one who's risen from the dead. Who has all authority in heaven over all spirits and angels and demons and the future. And he has all authority on earth over all races and nations and leaders and religions and regions and humans and animals.
He's the divine son of God. And he invites us to worship him and to follow him. And he promises to include us in the work of making disciples of others. In other words, he says, I have all authority. And now he doesn't speak about what he will do, but what we will do. And that means he has a purpose for his world. He has a purpose for every person in his world. And he has a purpose for you.
[23:58] The resurrection gives us the great why to life. It's to be his followers, his disciples, and to help others become disciples as well.

Knowing that we're very imperfect. We're big failures. But trusting in his grace and his power, which is perfect. In fact, Jesus later says, my power is made perfect in your weaknesses.
And if we feel overwhelmed by all this, the chapter finishes, and I'll finish with this, with this breathtaking assurance.
See verse 20? Behold, he says, I am with you always to the end of the age. It's not I will be with you. It's present. I am with you. And literally he says, I myself am with you, no less than me, the Lord of grace and life.
In other words, he doesn't leave his disciples to get on without resources under our own steam. He doesn't leave us to be paralyzed by our own failures. He stands at the end of history.
[24:58] He's giving an eternal point of view. And he's saying the age in which we live has an end to it. When the nations and kingdoms of this world will become the kingdoms of our God and of his

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Christ.

And I am with you all of every day until the end of this age. Which means this is a promise not just for the eleven, but for us.
And what is at the absolute heart of the promise? It's companionship. I'll be with you. Not once, not twice, not in the high spiritual moments, but all day of every day.
It's no wonder we sing these hymns. Amen. And he stands with us today with his grace and his power as alive as he ever was. And he stands at the end of our lives promising to bring us into his presence.
He has a special work to do there. And he stands at the end of history with all authority and grace and goodness. And he says to us, follow me. Come to me.
[26:01] And I will make you disciples. Amen.

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