

New Life - EASTER DAY

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[0 : 00] The Russian author Leo Tolstoy wrote a book in his mid-50s called A Confession. It's an autobiographical study of his struggle with his midlife existential crisis.

It describes his search for the answer to the ultimate philosophical question of life. If God does not exist, since death is inevitable, what therefore is the meaning of life?

He wrote, my question was the simplest of questions, lying in the soul of every man, a question without an answer to which one cannot live.

It was, what will come of what I am doing today or tomorrow? What will come of my whole life? Why should I live?

Why wish for anything or do anything? It can also be expressed thus. If there is any meaning in life that the inevitable death awaiting me does not destroy.

[1 : 15] Death is the great interruption that tears apart relationships. It's the great schism ripping apart the material and the immaterial parts of our being. Death is the great insult because it reminds us, as Shakespeare said, that we are but worm food.

Death is hideous. It is frightening. It is cruel. It is unusual. Death is the great enemy. And more than anything else, it makes a claim on our lives.

Death is the great enemy. Death is the great enemy. And yet in the modern world, we seem unwilling to talk about it, even at funerals. And therefore, we are even less prepared for it.

But this day is the day where we remember the solution to it all. Easter day declares that death has been conquered. Life has meaning.

Even death itself has meaning. And so welcome to the celebration of life at St. Paul's. In fact, that's been our whole theme throughout this term.

[2 : 20] We have been in the New Testament letter of 1 Peter. Nick read out a little bit of a section for it of us this morning. And 1 Peter opens with a bold statement of new life in Jesus.

Praise be to God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. In his great mercy, he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

Now, in the lead up to this day, we have been seeing what it means to live this new resurrected life, this new hope that we have in the resurrection, and how Jesus' resurrection changes everything for us in life.

And 1 Peter, the bit that we've been going through over this term, was written by one of Jesus' earliest followers. The same Peter who was also the source, if you like, of information for Mark's gospel, which was just read out to us a moment.

And as we've spent a term looking at new resurrected life in Jesus through Peter's eyes in his letter, what I want to do today is I want to go back to the beginning and see how the resurrection of Jesus Christ changed everything for Peter.

[3 : 39] And there are three changes that I want us to see. They're up there on the screen. New minds, new hearts, new lives. So new minds. So let's start with that.

Chapter 16 of Mark verse 6 is a challenge to our minds. Don't be alarmed, he said. You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene who was crucified. He has risen.

He's not here. Now that is a challenge to our minds. That is, after his execution, Jesus came back to life. Now the fact he was crucified was not unusual.

That's not a miracle in any way. You know, around Jesus' time, there were dozens of these little movements in first century Palestine where the leader declared themselves to be the Messiah of all of humanity, as Jesus himself claimed.

In almost every case, the leader of those groups was killed. They were executed. And the moment the leader was executed, the movement dissolved.

[4 : 45] You know, everyone packed their bags and went home or ran for their lives. That was it. But only the movement led by Jesus the Nazarene didn't collapse after the death of its leader.

In fact, after the death of its leader, it exploded. And within 200 years, it was dominant in the Roman Empire and to today, the largest and most widespread culturally and geographically of all religious faiths in our world.

So what made the difference? Why this one? Well, the Bible says that after Jesus was killed, he came back to life and appeared to his followers. That is, the resurrection is the way Christianity exploded.

Now, I know this is 2024 and it really challenges our minds and our assumptions. The thing is, though, if we want to reject the resurrection, then we've got another miracle that we have to try and explain away, an historical fact.

And that is, why did this movement explode and continues to do so globally? Why?

[6 : 01] You've got to come up with an alternative explanation as to why that happened. What are the historically plausible alternatives?

Simply saying dead people don't rise just is not an answer to that question. One accusation of the gospel accounts of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John of Jesus' life is that, well, they're not reliable. You know, there's a temptation to call the historical documents legends. And Mark does not allow us to get away with that accusation so clearly. Three times in eight verses that Nick read out to us, Mark 15 verse 40, in 1547, in 161, Mark writes down the name of the eyewitnesses who saw it all. Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Siloam. Why three times? Why did Mark say it three times? Well, according to one scholar who understands a whole lot more about the way that history, ancient historiography, how it works, is that all of this is marks of how historians did history in the first century.

These women are described as eyewitnesses. Chapter 15 verse 40. Some women were watching. 1547, Mary Magdalene and Mary, the mother of Joseph, saw where he was laid.

[7 : 34] 16 verse 4. When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which is very large, had been rolled away. Verse 5. As they entered the tomb, they saw. Verse 6.

When they see the place where they laid him. Mark sees these women as clear eyewitnesses to the death, the burial and the resurrection of Jesus.

Not like they got lost on Sunday. Went to the wrong place. They saw it all. Scholars say this alone is slam dunk proof that the resurrection is written as history.

One of the strongest early arguments, however, against the resurrection is that the accounts of the resurrection is based on the eyewitness of women.

Second century Greek philosopher named Celsus, someone opposed to the Christian faith, wrote the resurrection was a lie because women were the eyewitnesses.

[8 : 40] He didn't dispute that women were the eyewitnesses. He said it was a lie because women were eyewitnesses. And his words, not mine, women are hysterical. They couldn't even be regarded as reliable witnesses in law courts in the first century.

And so you've got to ask yourself the question. If Mark was making something up, why on earth would he shoot himself in the foot right from the first go by saying that the early witnesses to the resurrection were women?

Why would he do that? If it's all a fallacy. If you want people to be convinced of something that didn't happen, you don't do that.

That's because Mark has written this as a historical documentation of actual events that change the way we see the world. And then you might say, well, okay, all right. This stuff is written as history. But, you know, they've got the facts muddled up. You know, ancient people, not like us modern people, they're just so gullible. They don't have our modern developed minds.

[9 : 55] They might have had the same IQs that we've got, but they just don't have the same information. You know, we've learned a thing or two over the last 2,000 years. Of course, that is making the assumption that the first century worldview was open to the idea of a resurrection.

But it wasn't. Jesus told his disciples quite clearly on several occasions, I'm going to die and I'm going to come back to life.

Clearly. And the third day arrives after his death and no one's looking for a resurrection. No one.

The women had gone and bought spices to anoint a dead body. That's what they were doing at the tomb. They weren't expecting a resurrection. The disciples, you know, they're sitting around at

breakfast on the third day.

And none of them say, you know, you remember he said about coming back to, do you think we should go and just walk past the tomb and have a look? Do you think? They're eating their cornflakes for goodness sake.

[11:08] The women on the way there were wondering who was going to open the tomb for them. It was just as impossible for them to believe as it is for us today. And their first thought of seeing the empty tomb was, oh, wow, resurrection.

No, it wasn't. Someone has stolen his body. The whole point of this is just simply, if you've got doubts about the resurrection, so did they.

And they were walked with him for three years. But they and us, we need to let the evidence challenge our mindset and our worldview.

If we want to dismiss the resurrection of Jesus Christ as a fallacy, we must at least come up with an alternative, historically and philosophically plausible reason why this little ragtag group exploded to all corners of the globe and changed the world for over 20 centuries.

We also must come up with an alternative, historically plausible explanation of what actually happened to the body of Jesus. The Christians, the Romans and the Jews all historically agree that Jesus was laid in a tomb and that after three days that tomb was empty.

[12:32] We also must come up with an alternative, historically plausible reason why hundreds of people claimed to have seen him resurrected and why the opponents of Christianity couldn't produce a body and why these early Christians joyfully gave their lives to see this message of the resurrected Christ spread throughout all the world.

The resurrection of Jesus is a historical reality, not a mere symbolic hope. And for it to really change the course of our lives, it must be real.

Not as a mere feel-good factor thing. Not merely as a hope to overcome bad scenarios. He has to have come out of that tomb.

Now, if we allow our minds to be challenged with the reality of that, then we'll discover a deep mercy and a grace that will produce in us new hearts. See the word of grace there. It's in chapter 16, verse 7.

Go tell his disciples and Peter, he is going ahead of you into Galilee. And there you will see him just as he told you.

[13:55] The question is, why does Peter get a special mention here? The reason is, is because there is hardly a greater story of such spectacular failure and betrayal as that of Peter.

Just after Jesus is arrested, Peter disowns Jesus three times. Only hours earlier, Peter had, you know, in view of all the other disciples and the hearing of all the other disciples, he proudly declared that even if the rest of these are no longer standing following you, Jesus, I will die with you.

I will never abandon you. And within hours, before the crow, the rooster crows twice, he does the very thing that he says he would never do.

Not only that, he does it three times. Now, you can't say he got caught off guard, you know. I mean, you know, we lose our minds sometimes and isolated incident, you know, it's not the true me.

You do it three times, it is the true you. Later that night, as Jesus is in trial of his life, Peter is likewise on the trial of his life, standing around a fire warming himself.

[15:28] Twice he denied following Jesus. And then on the third occasion, we read, he began to call down curses and he swore to them, I don't know this man you're talking about.

And immediately the rooster crowed and he broke down and he wept. The word for curse there in the original Greek language means that he cursed someone or something.

Not that he just, you know, went nuts with his language. And he clearly was not calling curses down on himself. Or to the people that he's trying to defend himself against.

He's trying to deflect suspicion. We're meant to read that as he cursed Jesus Christ publicly.

He condemned him to death publicly. It is one of the most horrendous betrayals that has ever been written.

[16:42] Ever been put pen to paper. Ever been put pen to paper. The minute the rooster crows, the magnitude of what he has done breaks his heart. And he breaks down.

For those of you who are part of a shame and honour culture, know this. He's part of a shame and honour culture.

He has broken an oath and he's put his own needs over his master. He has shamed himself in a way that can never ever be repaired.

This is the leader of the early Christian movement. He is the source. And get this. This is Mark recording this.

He is the source of Mark recording this. He is ensuring that for now, 20 centuries later, that anyone who reads Mark's gospel would be clear that I failed Jesus.

[17 : 51] Jesus. And if the word to the women was just simply go and tell the disciples, they would have relayed that message to the disciples and Peter would have just concluded, you guys go, it can't mean me.

That can't include me. Not after what I've done. Peter was the biggest screw up. And the good news of Christianity is that salvation is by grace alone.

Other religions say, you screw up like that, you're done. It's by your works and your effort and your strength. Christianity says that salvation comes to the weakness, the weakness of the weakest of people.

And it's because of the weakness of Jesus Christ dying on the cross. He was abandoned by all. He was abandoned by his father. Not just by Peter. It was God's plan, not an accident of history.

Salvation comes to us through Jesus when we admit an inability, when we admit our weakness and our failure, when we admit that we are sinners and we need a savior.

[19 : 08] Salvation comes into our lives when we die to ourselves and we repent. And it feels like a death. It feels like a death to admit our failure.

But the resurrection is the guarantee. We are forgiven. Easter is the guarantee. It is the declaration that the full debt of our sin against God has been paid.

You know, when a criminal completes a jail sentence, they walk out of jail fully, completely having totally satisfied the sentence.

There is no more claim on them. They are free. Jesus Christ came to pay the penalty for our crimes against God.

But on Easter day, he walked out of that tomb free. The debt's been paid, paid in full. As Mark's gospel ends, you don't know what's next for Peter.

[20 : 11] But we find out what's next for Peter at the end of John's gospel. There is hardly a greater proof of the effect of the resurrection than on the shores of Galilee early one morning as Jesus restores Peter.

The encounter between Jesus and Peter is set up by Jesus. And once again, it's around a fire.

The last time Peter was here, he brought down curses upon Jesus. And so Peter, Jesus gently asked him, Do you love me more than the other disciples?

It wasn't that long ago he said that he did. Now he knows he doesn't. Peter doesn't even answer the question. He just says, I love you.

Jesus asked him three times. Three times he denied him. Three times he gets an opportunity to restore and say, I love you. It seems hard for Peter, but he is dying a death.

[21 : 24] He dies to his own insufficiency. Every time Jesus asks him the question, he's reminded of his complete failure. But every single time Jesus picks him up and gives him a mission of leading the early Christian movement, Jesus tells him to feed his lambs, take care of his sheep, feed my sheep.

Jesus used to be a shepherd of God's people, the early church, and that role would be requiring him of great tenderness, something that was not necessarily Peter's bent, and of also great courage.

He proved himself to be a coward. And nothing would make Peter more effective for this role than his own moral failure, plunged into the sea of the grace of Jesus Christ.

That's this new life. The very thing that happened on the shore of Galilee was Peter's death was foretold.

That's the next thing that happened. He too would be crucified as follower of Jesus Christ. This happened under persecutions of Nero. Only very early reference to Peter's death suggests that he chose to be crucified upside down because he felt so unworthy to die like his saviour.

[22 : 51] Around the first fire, Peter was on trial for his life and he cowardly saved his own skin. From the moment of the second fire, his heart was filled up and he courageously gave his life for Jesus.

And so if we allow the evidence to give us new lives, Jesus' grace and forgiveness to give us new hearts, it results in a new life of meaning and purpose.

I think it's remarkable the way that Mark's gospel ends. It's shocking, really. It just simply says, as trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb, they said nothing to anyone because they were afraid.

The resurrection was such great news. Of course, I think it's meant to shock us. I mean, I don't blame them. The resurrection is the answer to our deepest longing to live life well.

With Tolstoy, one of the great reasons it's so hard to suffer is that we think this physical world is just it and when you lose this, you lose the best and most precious thing. The resurrection means that this is not it.

[24 : 09] There is more to come. The resurrection means that God is going to perfectly remake this world. This is genuine, real, tangible hope for the wheelchair bound, the person with crippling emotional pain and everything in between.

No religion in this world, no philosophical system in this world except biblical Christianity promises that the future is new and perfect minds, hearts and bodies forever for our joy.

The historical, physical resurrection of Jesus changes everything. If you know that this is not the only tangible, concrete life, who cares what people think of you?

The resurrection makes you free from this life, free and brave and courageous and sacrificial and generous and patient and joyful. The resurrection means you can face the worst things in life with joy and hope.

The resurrection means you can give yourself to serving God in this world that he loves and is redeeming and remaking through Jesus Christ. The issue on which everything hangs, including Tolstoy's question of meaning, is whether Jesus rose from the dead or not.

[25 : 24] If it is true, then you cannot live your life any way that you want. Nor, however, do we need to fear anything in life, including death itself.

One of the great expressions of Christian hope in literature is from the poet, the 17th century poet, George Herbert. It's called A Dialogue Anthem.

It imagines this dialogue between death and a Christian. It's based on 1 Corinthians 15. It's on the screen. I won't read it out to you. But here's a Christian looking at death and saying, come on, spare not, do your worst.

Come on, have a go. Hit me with your best shot. Fire away. The lower you lay me, the higher you will raise me. The harder you hit me, the more brilliant and glorious I will be.

That is the Christian hope. When the famous Chicago minister, Dwight L. Moody, was dying, he said quite famously, pretty soon you'll read in the Chicago papers that Dwight Moody is dead.

[26 : 47] Don't you believe it? I will be more alive than I am right now. There is no power like the resurrection to give us new life, to navigate life and death with poise.

That means we can take care of malaches. Let's continue. Thank you, so Jake, let me tell you it is at home. Let's see. Thank you.etti Sony Acid Action Research Action Action Action Action Action Action Action Action Action Action Arm Action