

## Christ our Hope

Date: 20 April 2025, Easter Day

Location: St George's Battery Point

Series: The Cross of Christ

Texts: Matthew 27:45-28:10

*"The tombs broke open. The bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life."*

Easter is the strangest and most outrageous part of the Christian faith. Today Christians around the world will gather for the greatest day of celebration in our calendar: that Jesus rose from the dead. The resurrection of Jesus says that in a world where things fall apart and we all face the certainty of our own death and the death of those we love, death is not the end. There is life and hope. Surely it's too good to be true?

The baseline view of our culture is Naturalism, that is to say, that matter is all there is. There is no heaven, no hell, no afterlife. When you die you cease to exist. Your body decomposes. An Epicurean inscription from ancient Roman graves captures how we think about death well: "I was not. I was. I am not. I am not. I care not." And yet, every funeral that I've conducted and every funeral that I've attended, tells me that people don't really believe that death is the end and we're food for worms. Even stripped of any content from any faith tradition, people still express the desire that somehow, there is something beyond the grave.

The philosopher Peter Kreeft says that to tell people they must accept death as just another stage of growth is like telling a quadriplegic that paralysis is another stage of exercise.<sup>1</sup> We tell ourselves that death is natural. But we don't believe it. The fact is we're embarrassed about death because we're terrified.

### The fear of death

Why do we fear death? Let me suggest 3 reasons.

First, because we just don't know what lies on the other side. The "death is natural" approach might say there is nothing, but that cannot be proven. Epicurus wrote, "What men fear is not the fact that death is annihilation, but that it is not."<sup>2</sup> We are afraid of what we don't know and death is the ultimate unknown.

On top of this fear is a second, we're afraid of judgement. If there is something after death, we want it to be good, and not bad. And if there is reward or punishment, the question becomes have we done enough? Will our good deeds outweigh our bad? And who decides? Facing death we can be filled with regret and terrified because we can't put right what we've done wrong.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Tim Keller, *Making Sense of God*, Hodder & Stoughton, 2016: 161

<sup>2</sup> Ibid 162.

The third reason we're afraid of death, and perhaps the biggest is that we're afraid of being abandoned. We're not made to be alone. In his book on the Apostle's Creed, Pope Benedict makes this point with this illustration. The person left to keep watch alone with a dead body. Rationally she knows that the corpse cannot harm her, and yet she is afraid. Benedict suggests that this fear is of being alone with death, which is the uneasiness and vulnerability of our own nature. This fear cannot be overcome by reason, but only by the presence of someone who loves her. Our fear of death is that it is a state of abandonment so deep that the presence of love could not penetrate it, that we would be utterly, dreadfully alone. He writes, "In truth - one thing is certain: there exists a night into whose solitude no voice reaches; there is a door through which we can only walk alone - the door of death."<sup>3</sup>

Maybe you've come to church today because you're honest enough to acknowledge that fear. You look around and see that the rational, materialistic world where everything is under our control, is coming apart at the seams, and you're wondering, hoping against hope that death is not the end.

Over the past 7 weeks at St George's we've been exploring just what Jesus' death on the cross accomplished for us. On Good Friday we saw how the cross is all about substitution. Christ dies in our place. Each of the themes we've covered contains the element of substitution. On the cross Christ stands as the example of love which we're called to follow. On the cross he steps in to fight for us. On the cross he makes peace on our behalf. On the cross he offers himself as a sacrifice for us. On the cross he hangs as the second Adam, our representative, doing what we could not do. On the cross he hangs as God crucified, dying in our place. Today we're going to look at how Jesus' cross and resurrection go together. The one who died was raised to life, and so in Jesus we have hope. We're going to lean into the strangeness of Matthew's account of Jesus' death and resurrection. He, perhaps of all the Gospel writers, shows how the cross and resurrection bleed into each other.

### **The Broken Tombs**

So I want to zero in on what Matthew says happened at the moment of Jesus' death. Have a read with me from verse 51:

At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook, the rocks split **52** and the tombs broke open. The bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. **53** They came out of the tombs after Jesus' resurrection and went into the holy city and appeared to many people.

What is going on here?

Let's deal with the curtain first. That curtain separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the temple. Inside the Holy of Holies was symbolically God's throne on earth. Only the high priest could go inside behind the curtain, and only once a year. And only after he had made a sacrifice to atone for his own sins and the sins of the whole people. As we saw when we looked at the theme of sacrifice, Jesus is the

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<sup>3</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Introduction to Christianity*, Ignatius, 2004: 298-301

final and perfect sacrifice. No more are needed. The torn curtain shows that the way to God is open to all. That the curtain was torn from top to bottom shows that, in Jesus' death, it is God himself who has opened the way.

But what about the second thing that happened the moment Jesus died? The earthquake. The tombs breaking open. The dead being raised. What is going on in this strange account? As a somewhat left field way into that question, let me ask, if you had to choose one picture to represent Jesus' own resurrection, what would it be? Our sign this Easter is a stone rolled back from the door of the tomb. Mel Gibson's *the Passion* has the sun streaming through the nail holes in Jesus' hands. Well this is how the Eastern Orthodox represents the resurrection - in this icon.

Here we see a glorified Christ, standing over the broken doors of death. The chains and locks which held the dead are broken. He grasps Adam and Eve, representing redeemed humanity, by their wrists to raise them from the underworld. In the Apostle Creed we confess that Jesus descended into the dead. The old Anglo-Saxon word for this was hell. Not so much the place of the fire of God's final judgement, so much as the realm of the dead. So the icon of the resurrection shows the harrowing of hell.

It is this strange moment in Matthew's Gospel that gave rise to the other New Testament writers speaking about Christ "descending to the lower regions"<sup>4</sup> that is recorded in the creed. But why did the tombs break open at the moment of Jesus' death, and not with Jesus' own resurrection? It leads to a slight awkwardness in the text - the tombs break open on Good Friday, but the holy people who have died only come out of the tombs after Jesus' resurrection. If that was when they came out, why would Matthew be at pains to record that the tombs broke open when Jesus' died?

The answer comes in the words, in verse 54, spoken by the centurion who was guarding Jesus and who saw him die and who felt the earthquake: "Surely he was the Son of God!" Who is it who died? None other than the Son of God. In the person of Jesus, God has united himself with human nature. He has touched the very limits of our nature from conception through to death itself, to sanctify us and unite us to God. Theologian Ben Myers writes:

"The Son of God has taken our nature to himself. He allows our fallen nature to drag him down. He descends to the very abyss of the human condition. ... Because he shares our nature he is able to fall with us into death; because he is the Son of God he is able to fill death with his presence so that the grave becomes a source of life."<sup>5</sup>

This is why there is the earthquake and the tombs breaking open at the point of Jesus' death: because the source of life himself has broken the gates of death and entered even there to rescue us. His inexhaustible life has penetrated death itself, so it spills out anticipating his own resurrection just a few short days later, like light shining through the cracks of a darkened door.

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<sup>4</sup> Ephesians 4.9

<sup>5</sup> Ben Myers, *The Apostle's Creed*, Lexham Press: 80-82

John Calvin writes, “This was a particular portent in which God testified that His Son had entered death’s prison, not to stay there shut up, but to lead all free who were there held captive.”<sup>6</sup> Calvin here is just echoing the words of Hebrews, that the eternal Son of God became truly human, “so that by his death ... he might free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.”<sup>7</sup>

I also note that Matthew records an earthquake at the moment when Jesus’ own tomb was opened. If the author of life wants now to return from the grave, how could its gates hold him? As Jesus says in John’s Gospel on his way to Lazarus’ tomb, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die.”<sup>8</sup> And so the saints who appear after Jesus’ resurrection are the first of the freed captives joining his victory parade. They are a little window into the promise and sure hope that Jesus’ resurrection brings to all who would believe in him. Resurrection and life.

We began this morning by looking at our fear of death. We fear death because it is unknown. We fear death because we fear judgement. We fear death because we fear being utterly abandoned and alone. But in Matthew’s strange account of Good Friday and Easter morning we find hope. We’ve seen that in Christ, God has become one of us, so that by his death he might free us who are held in slavery by the fear of death. There is no place that we can go where Christ is not, not even death. He is our champion, who has defeated death, broken its chains and freed us from its power. If death was God’s judgement upon sin, then Jesus’ resurrection means vindication and life. He alone is our hope and strength. Will you trust him? Freed from the power of death you need not fear but can live the life of love God calls us to. You can live a life of self sacrifice, because you no longer need to hang on to your life. You can live a life of purpose and vision, because death is no longer your horizon. You can live a life of forgiveness, because the one who has triumphed over the grave is also the one who reconciles enemies and forgives even you.

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<sup>6</sup> John Calvin, *A Harmony of the Gospels Matthew, Mark and Luke*, trans. A.W. Morrison, vol 3, Saint Andrews Press, 1972: 211

<sup>7</sup> Hebrews 2.14-15

<sup>8</sup> John 11.25-26