

Long Live the King - Easter 2023

Date: 9 April 2023, Easter Day

Location: St George's Battery Point

Series: Matthew's Passion

Texts: Matthew 27:57-28:15; Isaiah 25>6-9

The Most Dangerous Idea in history - That Jesus rose from the dead.

What is the most dangerous idea in the world? 10 years ago the ABC hosted a panel during Sydney's *Festival of Dangerous Ideas* featuring feminist icon Germaine Greer, journalist Hanna Rosin, gay activist Dan Savage and Peter Hitchens, journalist and brother of the celebrity atheist Christopher Hitchens. The final question the panel answered was "what dangerous idea would have the greatest potential to change the world for the better?" Savage suggested population control. Greer said freedom. Rosin said we should watch our children less. This is what Peter Hitchens said:

"The most dangerous idea in human history and philosophy remains the belief that Jesus Christ is the son of God and rose from the dead ... that is the most dangerous idea you will ever encounter."

Asked to elaborate by host Tony Jones, Hitchens continued,

"[It's dangerous] because it alters the whole of human behaviour and all our responsibilities. It turns the universe from meaningless chaos into a designed place in which there is justice and there is hope and therefore we all have the duty to discover the nature of that justice and work towards that hope. ... it's incredibly dangerous. That's why so many people are against it."

Through the last 7 weeks leading up to Easter we've been studying Matthew's account of Jesus' suffering and death and today we come to his record of Jesus' resurrection. Each of the Gospels records different details around Jesus' resurrection. Matthew's account suggests that the idea that Jesus could have risen from the dead was, from the outset, dangerous. Matthew presents 2 sets of people and their response to Jesus' resurrection. On the one hand there are the Jewish leaders and the Roman guards. On the other there are Jesus' disciples, first the women who witnessed his burial and then his chosen eleven. As we reflect on their responses, Matthew invites us to consider what our response might be to this most dangerous of ideas, the claim that Jesus rose from the dead, in flesh and blood.

Matthew presents us with the 2 basic facts of the resurrection accounts. First, there is the empty tomb. Second, first the women and then the disciples encounter Jesus. I find it fascinating that Matthew records people grappling with the reality of the empty tomb right from the first. On Saturday morning the chief priests and the Pharisees go to Pilate and ask for soldiers to guard the tomb. They remember Jesus' promise that "after three days I will rise again", and they are afraid his disciples will steal the body and tell people he has been raised from the dead. "This deception will be worse than the first."

Just as they have conspired to see Jesus crucified, so now the Jewish leaders want to make sure the job stays done. Jesus and his movement must stay dead. But then, as dawn breaks on Sunday, there is an earthquake, an angel rolls the stone from in front of the tomb and the soldiers guarding it fall down like dead men. In verse 11 they slink away back to the chief priests and report what had happened. The empty tomb could not be denied. And so now they use the very story they feared would happen as a fabricated explanation. The disciples stole the body while the guards were asleep. But in order to keep their story consistent, they bribe the guards. And to protect the guards from any consequences in failing their duty, they promise to “satisfy the governor”, presumably with another substantial bribe. It’s the classic tactics those in power use to silence their opponents when they feel threatened - hush money, lies, and brute force.

Matthew says this story of the disciples stealing Jesus’ body, “has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day.”¹ Lest we think this is just Matthew making this up, in the mid 2nd century Justin Martyr writes that this story was still being put forward by the Jews as the explanation for the empty tomb.² Whatever happened that Sunday after Jesus died, the fact remains the tomb was empty.

This is what the women faced too. They came to the tomb, only to find it empty and an angel sitting on the stone.

5 The angel said to the women, ‘Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. **6** He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. **7** Then go quickly and tell his disciples: “He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.”...

8 So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. **9** Suddenly Jesus met them. ‘Greetings,’ he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshipped him. ...

With talk of angels and the risen Jesus we move from the concrete fact of the empty to something else - a personal encounter. How are we to explain this? Many have tried to explain the empty tomb and the encounters with Jesus on purely material terms, that is, without reference to God. Here are some of the arguments:

1. That Jesus didn’t really die. Someone gave him a drug that made him look dead, but he later revived. The problem is the Romans knew how to execute people.
2. When the women went to the tomb they met someone else who they thought was Jesus. The problem is people would have noticed that it wasn’t Jesus before long.

¹ Matthew 28.15

² *Trypho* 108

3. Jesus only appeared to people who believed in him. Except that we read Thomas did not believe and neither did Paul when they met the risen Jesus. In fact none of the disciples believed or expected Jesus to rise from the dead.
4. The accounts are biased. So is everyone. This argument cuts both ways, because those who dismiss the resurrection might have a vested interest in doing so.
5. Lots of people have visions of someone they love who has just died, and this is what happened to the disciples. The answer to this is yes, but they wouldn't have said "he's been raised from the dead." They would have said they'd seen his ghost or spirit.³
6. That the disciples had some kind of rich spiritual experience of Jesus. The problem is that that is just the Platonic idea of the immortality of the soul, not the Jewish idea of the resurrection of the dead. Jesus' resurrection doesn't fit either description. Against Plato, he is raised bodily. Against Jewish expectations, he is raised in the middle of history, not at the end.

There are, on the other hand, some pieces of evidence that suggest that Jesus really did rise from the dead.

1. Jewish tombs, especially of martyrs, were venerated. There is no evidence of this happening with Jesus' grave.
2. The early church's emphasis on the first day of the week as their special day is hard to explain unless something momentous happened that day. This by the way is why Christians go to church on Sundays, not Saturday, like our Jewish spiritual ancestors.
3. The disciples weren't likely to suffer and die for something they did not believe to be true.⁴

The evidence points to it, but what would it mean if Jesus really did rise from the dead that first Easter morning? The claim is so dangerous because it changes everything. It would mean that the material world is not all there is. We are not alone. Heaven has broken through. Death is not the end, it is not something we need fear, it is not the greatest power, but has been defeated by the love and life of God. It means that those who wield power, and the power of death, are not the ultimate arbiters of reality.

Matthew finishes his gospel with Jesus speaking a word that terrifies all the powers and presidents of this world. "All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me."⁵ He is the one to whom all other authorities must submit, and before whom they will have to bow the knee. He is the judge who will bring to light what has been done and who will bring true and complete justice. It's why politicians are at their best when they remember this, and at their worst when they ignore it. Jesus' resurrection changes how we see the world. What we think is possible. It raises the question whether intellectual traditions that try to deny Jesus' resurrection are doing that, like the chief priests, because it threatens their power and position.

³ Cf. Acts 12.12-15

⁴ The above section is adapted from Tom Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, SPCK, 2007: 72-75

⁵ Matthew 28.18

But that is not all Jesus says. He closes Matthew's Gospel with these words - "Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."⁶ What sweet words of comfort and hope in this world full of wickedness, suffering, darkness and death. You see if Jesus really did rise from the dead that means he is alive now. Yes we can weigh the evidence for the resurrection, the empty tomb and so on. The question of history is important. But we can also encounter Jesus today, even as the two Mary's did that first Easter day. He is here, present in his body, the Church. He feeds us at his table. He speaks through his Word the Bible. Maybe you have heard his voice today in our service. He invites you to come to him so that you know his presence and power in your life. That with him, you are never alone, and in your darkness he is light that cannot be overcome.

How might we respond to the risen Jesus? For the church, he gives the charge - go and make disciples, baptising them and teaching them to obey all that he has commanded. We can all play our part in this. But I want today to just touch on the varied responses of the women and the disciples. In verse 8 we read that the women were afraid yet filled with joy. Suddenly Jesus met them and they worshipped him. Then we read on the mountain that the disciples worshipped him, but some doubted.⁷ I love the honesty about the experience of faith here. Fear and joy. Worship and doubt. If that was the case for them who saw Jesus in the flesh, how much more for us who grasp him by faith. And yet in John's Gospel, Jesus tells Thomas, "Because you've seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." Jesus' invitation to you and to me today, is to join with the women and the disciples, to bring all the complexity of our experience, joy and fear and doubt, and to fall before him in worship. To own him as our Lord and God. Will you do that today? As we sing his praise, as we confess our faults, as we're fed at his table, will you offer him your whole self in worship?

In his play *Salome*, Oscar Wilde imagines king Herod responding to the news that Jesus has been raised. "I do not wish him to do that," Herod says. "I forbid him to do that. I allow no man to raise the dead. This man must be found and told that I forbid him to raise the dead." That Jesus rose from the dead is the most dangerous idea in history. It has transformed the world. It can transform your life. That after all is what worship is - a reordering of everything around that which you worship. Today, will you forbid him to rise, or will you worship the risen Christ and find his life and light?

⁶ Matthew 28.20

⁷ Matthew 28.17