

# Sermon for Easter Day

The Text: John 20:1-18

## Easter is the best news ever

What's the best news you've ever heard? Was it a big surprise, completely unexpected? The message of our Saviour's resurrection from the dead on that first Easter Sunday is not only good news for us in this life and beyond, it's the best news imaginable, for all eternity. In our increasingly less religious society that thinks death is the end, Christ's resurrection from the dead means there's something more final than even death. Our Lord's resurrection is linked inseparably to the resurrection from death of all of us who love Him and believe in Him. We sing: "*Could the head rise and leave His members dead?*" Never! Impossible!

The first woman to arrive at Jesus' tomb while it was still dark on Sunday morning was Mary Magdalene. No other follower of Jesus owed more to our Lord than she did. Good Friday was the worst day of her life. She'd lost the best friend and helper she ever had. She wanted to be as near to Jesus as possible. Imagine her shock when she's confronted by something she wasn't expecting: an empty tomb. This throws her in a double panic, immediately thinking someone's taken Jesus away. But no one has taken Jesus away. Rather, He's left death behind forever. Jesus will not let death have the final say.

Today we celebrate the most important event in human history - our Lord's defeat of death and the commencement of a wonderful new life that can never end! Nothing is the same again. The future has taken on a new face, full of hope and promise. The Greek word for "resurrection" conveys the idea of going towards newness, to a better, richer life overflowing with a living hope.

St. Peter was overwhelmed with the new possibilities Easter opened up for him as our Lord rehabilitated him after his failure on the dawn of Good Friday. With overwhelming gratitude he celebrates all that the events of Easter now mean to him: "Thank God, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, that in His great mercy we have been born again into a life full of hope, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and into an inheritance that's imperishable, undefiled and unfading kept in heaven for you (1 Peter 1:3-4)." Peter was amazed that he was the first person Mary told about Jesus' empty grave.

Amazingly, the first person to whom Mary runs to tell about the empty tomb is Peter, the very disciple who denied Jesus three times. Her running reveals her profound emotional involvement in what's happened. She hasn't ostracised Peter despite his lapse in loyalty to our Lord. "They've taken the Lord out of the tomb!"

she urgently tells Peter and John. She still calls Him Lord because she sees Jesus as her unsurpassed Benefactor. Peter and John cannot wait to see the empty tomb. John beats Peter there. Everything's too neat in the tomb for it to be a case of robbery. John now believes Jesus' words about how He would rise from the grave, but Peter, so overwhelmed by what's happened, doesn't know yet what to believe.

Mary meanwhile stays at the tomb, overcome with grief and sorrow, with tears flooding her eyes. Two angels ask her why she's crying. "They've taken my Lord", she says. Imagine all the love and devotion packed into those words: MY LORD. Can you say with utmost love and devotion that Jesus is "MY LORD" too? Who would want anyone else to be the Lord and Master of their life? Only our Lord Jesus Christ can guarantee our resurrection from the dead. Now Jesus is standing near Mary, but in her sobbing, she doesn't recognise Him. Thinking He's the gardener, she asks if He knows where the body of Jesus is.

Christ, the Good Shepherd, who knows His sheep and calls them by name, says her name "Mary". That's the first word spoken by our risen Redeemer. Imagine the love that flowed into her heart when Jesus mentions her by name. This one word spoken by the most significant Person she'd ever known changed her life forever. She replies: "My dear teacher." Never before was one word more charged with emotion than this one, using the term with which Jews addressed God in prayer. Mary believes in our risen Lord, not because she saw Jesus, but because He spoke to her. Today He speaks to you too, using reassuring words, like "Because I live, you will live also (John 14:19)."

All those who encounter our risen Lord at Easter are sent out as His missionaries to spread the good news of Christ's resurrection as soon as possible, as far as possible. Jesus gives Mary a mission: "Don't hold onto me ... Go instead to my brothers and sisters and tell them I'm returning to my Father and your Father (v17)." Imagine how Peter felt to now be called Jesus' "brother", a term expressing greater intimacy and closeness than even "friend". Picture the joy with which both Peter and John would have heard the good news from Mary: "I have seen the Lord!" He's no longer called "Teacher" but "the Lord", the all-victorious Lord of life and only conqueror of death.

To know Jesus as our risen Lord is to know and experience the power of His resurrection to transform our attitudes, our priorities and our activities, to give us a hope that nothing can destroy. The good news of His resurrection turned pre-Easter cowards into passionate advocates for our risen Saviour. Nothing could stop them speaking about Jesus and the difference His resurrection made in their lives.

After Easter, Jesus' disciples experienced His presence in their lives stronger than ever before. Easter made the experience of Christ's Easter presence more energizing than before. The early Christians were convinced Christ was truly alive in a new and powerful way, as Lord of all. As our risen Redeemer, our Lord's words

now address us in a powerful way that continues to impact on us in unexpected ways. Still today, Christians in many different parts of our world continue to respond to our risen Saviour's life-giving mission charge: "Go and make disciples of all nations."

Easter means that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ, a love given to us so wonderfully in the Lord's Supper. The Lord's Supper celebrates God's victory over death and enables us to face death without fear.

English preacher David Watson, before dying of cancer, described his beliefs about death: "In one sense", he wrote, "the Christian is not preparing for death. Essentially he is preparing for life, abundant life in all its fullness. ... The best and purest joys on earth are only a shadow of the reality that God has prepared in Christ. Eternal life begins as soon as we receive Christ as our Saviour. ... When I die, it is my firm conviction that I shall be more alive than ever. ... The actual moment of dying is still shrouded in mystery, but as I keep my eyes on Jesus, I am not afraid. Jesus has already been through death for us, and will be with us when we walk through it ourselves."

Christian worship begins on a Sunday, the first day of the week, in commemoration of Easter Sunday. Because of Easter, Sunday now assumed the importance and significance once ascribed to Saturday, the Sabbath. The first Christians called it the Lord's Day, that is, the day that belongs to our Lord Jesus. The early Christians were referred to as "those who live according to the Lord's Day". Why? Because the presence of our risen Saviour, which they experienced in their Sunday worship, motivated all that they did in His name. Christians are those who never forget that they walk each day with their risen Lord.

Easter then is more, much more than just the reversal of Good Friday. There's a surplus of hope, an abundance of grace and mercy, and a transforming peace for us to revel in. The liberation Easter brings to us, gives us new power to love the unlovable, new patience with those who are touchy and easily irritated, and a cheerfulness that constantly keeps breaking out. "The risen Christ makes our life a continual festival" (St. Athanasius).

The good news of Easter makes all we do for our Lord Jesus worthwhile, so eternally worthwhile. 1 Corinthians 15, that magnificent celebration of the blessings of Easter, concludes with these words of encouragement: "My dear friends, stand firm and don't be shaken. Always keep busy working for the Lord. You know that everything you do for Him is worthwhile (1 Corinthians 15:58)." Such welcome news makes us keener than ever to engage in the Lord's work. Amen.