

Easter Sunday - 12 April 2020

Kate Wall

Good morning and happy Easter!

Today we remember the happiest day in history. The day when Jesus rose from the dead, triumphing over sin and death and having struck a fatal blow to every force of evil. He rose victorious, our great conquering King. As the song goes, death could not hold him down, for he is risen! Praise be to our God and King!

Most of us will know the story of that first Easter Sunday well. Very early in the morning, some women, friends of Jesus, had gone out from Jerusalem to the tomb where Jesus' body had been placed two days earlier. They wanted to prepare his body properly, with spices and balms, and so give him a proper burial. They hadn't been able to do this yet because there were restrictions around Passover and the Sabbath; they'd had to stay at home, and couldn't go out, even to bury their dead properly. We have a new understanding of restrictions this year, don't we.

So the women set out from home that morning and headed to the tomb. They'd expected to get there, find a way of moving the stone covering the entrance, prepare Jesus' body, and return home. As they walked along that morning, they had no idea the joy that the day would bring. Even in their wildest dreams, they couldn't have expected to find Jesus alive and well. Dead people simply do not come back to life. We all know this. Death is the end – of this life, at least. They walked out that morning with hearts full of grief. The happiest day in history started with tears and sorrow and not even a glimmer of hope.

And though we all know Easter Sunday is a happy day, I wonder whether many of us feel more like those women this morning. Our hearts, perhaps, are heavy. The future seems uncertain. We're not sure how bad our situations might get – how long we'll be isolated, how we'll manage to put food on the table, how the kids will manage learning from home, how our loved ones will be looked after in the nursing home, how many of our friends or family might succumb to this virus, how sick we might get if we catch it, or even if we'll still be alive to see the dawning of that day when fear has left and restrictions lift.

It's a very different Easter this year. Not being able to hug my parents today – or even see them – makes me sad, but I'm just one of many. We all grieve in some way today. If you feel as though the joy of this day has been overshadowed somehow, you're not alone. If in your mind, you know you should celebrate today, but your heart is struggling to get there, you're not alone. If perhaps you wonder whether there's any reason to hope today, you're not alone. But the good news is – in fact, the very best news is – because of today, because Jesus rose again, because death could not hold him down and he is risen victorious, we have every reason to hope, especially in times like this.

The resurrection gives us hope in the deep valleys of life. And this is what we're going to spend some time thinking about this morning. Today, we have hope because Jesus is risen.

If you have your bibles, please turn to 1 Peter 1, reading verses 3-9.

³ Praise be to the 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, ⁴ and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, ⁵ who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. ⁶ In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. ⁷ These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed. ⁸ Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, ⁹ for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

Peter wrote this letter to believers who lived in regions where Turkey is today. And they were people who faced many challenges. Peter describes them in v1 as 'scattered' – spread out, no central meeting place, distanced from other believers. There's a good chance that this was due to persecution. They were also people who were struggling, we see in v6 that they were 'suffering grief in all kinds of trials'. So Peter writes to encourage them in the face of their struggles. And in our passage this morning, Peter reminds them of the incredible hope they have because Jesus was raised from the dead. It's a message for us too. We mightn't face persecution, but we do face an 'invisible enemy', to use the words of one world leader. We're all facing various trials. We too are scattered, unable to meet together. And so Peter's words remind us also of the incredible hope we have because Jesus is risen.

Firstly, because of the resurrection, we can know that God is true - he keeps his promises.

I worked with a guy once who had the nickname 'flake' – and this wasn't because of the chocolate bar he liked. It was because he was completely unreliable. If he said he'd be somewhere, if he said he'd do something, there was about as much chance of him coming through as there is of finding loo paper at the shops these days. He was not a man of his word. Having a friend or colleague like this is one thing. But imagine having a god like this - a god of hollow words and empty promises.

Where would we be if this promise of God's presence and protection were not true: *the Lord himself goes before you and will be with you, he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid, do not be discouraged.*

Or what if this promise of forgiveness weren't true: *I have swept away your offenses like a cloud, your sins like morning mist. Return to me, for I have redeemed you.*

Or this promise of heaven: *the ransomed of the Lord will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.*

If our God did not keep his word, if he could break his promises, then we would have absolutely no reason to hope. At a time like this, we would be as alone as the rest of our world feels – caught up in fear, isolated, nowhere to turn, not even a glimmer of hope on the horizon.

Yet our God is so committed to his plans and purposes and promises, so zealous for the holiness of his name, so steadfast in his ways, that he gave his beloved son for us, that when he had suffered for our sake, he raised him from the dead to show his absolute power, to give us life, and to show us that no word of his will ever, ever fail.

The risen Lord Jesus shows us that God indeed has power over every force of evil, including death itself; our God is undefeated, our God cannot fail.

The risen Lord Jesus shows us that our sin, indeed, has been paid for. We are forgiven, washed clean, clothed in Jesus' righteousness.

The risen Lord Jesus is a guarantee that God will raise us too, just as he promised. In John 6, Jesus says *I shall lose none of those the Father has given me, but will raise them up at the last day.* This would not be possible if Jesus himself had not been raised. But in Peter's words: *Praise be to the 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.*

The resurrection of Jesus shows us that God is true – he keeps his promises. So in this time of trouble, whose promises will we hold on to? Our government may fail, our healthcare system may fail, our economy may fail, but God's word never will. Will you hold on to the promises of God?

Secondly, because of the resurrection, we have new birth. Peter tells us that in God's great mercy, he gives us new birth through the resurrection. Now, of course, this is not physical birth. You might remember in John 3, Jesus told Nicodemus that unless someone has been born again, they can never see the Kingdom of God. And poor Nicodemus replied *how can a man go back into his mother's womb and be born again?!* You'd hope that he were trying to be humorous here, wouldn't you, at least for the sake of his poor mum.

This new birth is rather a sweeping concept that means when someone puts their trust in Jesus, everything about who they are before God and who they are in this world changes. They receive a new identity: child of God, brother or sister of Christ, member Christ's family – the church. Citizenship in heaven. No longer belonging to this world but a stranger here, as Peter tells us v1, belonging instead to a higher place. Our passports marked 'heaven', not Australia. Not defined by our upbringing or education or weekly pay check, but defined by the infinite riches that are ours in Jesus. Not defined by our talents or potential, our sense of humour or looks or brains or practical skills but defined by the worth God has placed on us in Jesus. That's why Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:17 that if anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation, the old has gone and the new has come. Because Jesus is risen, we who believe in him have become new people. God is our father, Jesus is our brother along with every other believer, and heaven is our home. And we no longer live for ourselves, as Paul reminds us in 2 Corinthians 5, but we live to please Jesus. We no longer think about others in the way the world does, but the way Jesus does. We are new people. A new creation. We have new birth.

If we don't have Jesus in our lives, this virus changes everything. If we lose our health or job or pay check, if we lose the affirmation of friends or colleagues, if we lose those symbols of status we so loved – whether that be meals out or fancy clothing or expensive hobbies or overseas holidays - without Jesus, if we lose those things, in a sense we lose ourselves. Without Jesus, this virus can rob people of their identity. It can rob them of everything.

But this virus cannot touch who we are in Jesus. Yes, it might make our days uncomfortable – it might even take our life. But it cannot change the fact that God is our father, Jesus is our brother, along with every other believer. And heaven is our home. This virus cannot shake who we truly are, our identity in Jesus.

In God's great mercy, he gives us new birth through the resurrection of Jesus.

Thirdly, because of the resurrection, we have a living hope.

Now, hope is a curious thing. It's simply part of our fabric as humans. We hope for all kinds of things: for rain or sunshine, for good sleep or to stay up all night, to be an astronaut or deep-sea diver. We can hope to get a prestigious job or to never have to work again. And when one hope fades, another one tends to take its place.

But the world's idea of hope and God's idea of hope are two very different things. Although both look to the future, although both can give us a reason for living, add a bit of zeal and focus to our lives and even give some kind of moral compass, worldly hope comes with a distinct possibility that it won't be realised. If you hope to be an astronaut, for example, you have a 1 in 12.1million chance of making it happen. Those aren't great odds. Worldly hope comes with a very real chance of disappointment.

But Christian hope is different. Christian hope is certain. Absolutely rock-solid. It can never be frustrated, it can never fail, it can never disappear. As Peter writes, *in God's great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.* Our hope is grounded in who God is and what he's done. And because God cannot fail, because his word is true, our hope is secure. And Peter expounds this for us.

In v4, because of the resurrection, we have a living hope and an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. We have a future with God in heaven that is unshakable, and it's unshakable because Jesus is risen. Unlike the hopes of this world, which can be unattainable, changeable, frustrating or foolish, our great hope of eternity with God, of perfect fellowship with him in the new creation, is one that can never perish, spoil or fade. It is the inheritance of those who believe in Jesus and it is absolutely certain. Though we are strangers in this world, though we still suffer in this world, we look forward with certainty to a glorious future: eternity with our great God.

And note what else Peter says about it: *this inheritance is kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power.* **Our hope is certain because our inheritance is kept for us, just as we are kept for it.**

We will not die and get to the doorstep of heaven, only to realise there's nothing there. No, Peter says, this inheritance is kept for us, preserved by God himself. It's absolutely safe. Nor will it be the case that our inheritance is waiting safely for us in heaven, but we never make it. Rather, we are shielded by God's power, through faith. God keeps us on the narrow path and he will lead us all the way home. Our inheritance is preserved for us, and we are preserved for it, because our faith and hope are grounded in the God who never fails.

And finally, it is this sure hope that enables us to face trials with joy. Even in the context of suffering, we can have a living hope, and this hope enables us to live with joy. And this is not because we become some kind of spiritual masochists, delighting in suffering, but because hope shifts our horizons.

In her song 'Look Up Child', American singer Lauren Daigle cries out to God: where are you now, when darkness seems to win, where are you now when the world is crumbling, I hear you say, 'look up child'. Where are you now when all I feel is doubt, where are you now when I can't figure it out, I hear you say, 'look up child'. You're not threatened by the war, you're not shaken by the storm, I know you're in control, even in our suffering, even when it can't be seen, I know you're in control, I hear you say, 'look up child'.

Hope shifts our horizons. It causes us to look up, beyond our current trials, and toward our God and the inheritance he keeps for us. Hope means we aren't consumed by our present circumstances. They don't overwhelm us or become our sole focus. Hope means we keep our eyes steadfast on our great God and our glorious future, and that puts everything else in perspective. Suffering, however wretched it may well be, is temporary. The glory that awaits us is eternal. And so we can rejoice.

The apostle Paul knew this. Though he was beaten and stoned and horribly mistreated he could still say *this we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus...therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.* And in this, Peter joins him, saying *in all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. ⁷These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed. ⁸Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, ⁹for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.*

Because Jesus is risen, we have hope today, hope that no virus can take away. Our God is true & his promises never fail. We have new birth – we are new creations in Jesus, children of God, brothers and sisters of Christ, with our home in heaven. And we have an inheritance that is unshakable, kept for us and us for it. And because Jesus is risen, we have a living hope that enables us to rejoice, especially today.

On this Easter Sunday, let us remember our risen Lord Jesus and rejoice in the hope we have in him.