

Title: Resurrection Encounters
Scripture: John 20:19-28
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I love the story of some friends who were chatting one day when the conversation grimly turned to the issue of death.

One of the friends asked the others, "What would you like people to say about you at your funeral?"

One of the others answered, "I would want people to say, 'He was a great humanitarian who cared about his community.'"

A second replied, "I would want people to say, 'He was a great husband and father, an example for many to follow.'"

The third friend gave it some thought and answered, "I would hope someone says, 'Look, he's moving!'"

This is what we defiantly and joyfully celebrate every time we gather; Jesus is moving!

The Jesus story did not end with a pile of rotting bones in a long forgotten tomb in Palestine, but had a glorious new beginning when the earth shook with resurrection power. Jesus is moving and Jesus is here in the midst of the many more than two or three gathered in his name.

While each year there can be only one Good Friday and one Easter Sunday, every time we gather – every single time – is a remembering and celebration of the Easter story; that the death and resurrection of Jesus are the defining events of our world and our lives.

For the seven weeks leading up to Easter we journeyed through our RED series as we explored various life-changing encounters people had with Jesus as recorded in John's gospel. In this post Easter season we are going to continue with that theme, but shift the emphasis from encounters with Jesus to our response to Jesus in light of his crucifixion and resurrection. Wolfhart Pannenberg says this of the resurrection:

The evidence for Jesus' resurrection is so strong that nobody would question it except for two things: First, it is a very unusual event. And second, if you believe it happened, you have to change the way you live.
(Wolfhart Pannenberg)

The resurrection of Jesus changes everything. It did for the first disciples, and it should for us as well. Let's find out how as we read John's recollections, beginning with Easter Sunday:

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.
(John 20:19-20)

Up to this point, Peter and John and Mary Magdalene have seen the empty tomb. A little later, Mary becomes the first person to see and recognize Jesus after she first mistakes him for a cemetery gardener. That same night the eleven remaining disciples are gathered in a locked room together, most likely the same room they shared their last meal with Jesus in. The room is locked because the disciples understandably feared they faced the same fate as Jesus, which was the same fear that led Peter to deny Jesus three times on the night of his arrest.

Jesus enters the room miraculously. How, we don't know. What we do know is that he is not a ghost. Jesus' presence is physical – he has a visible body, including recognizable wounds. He talks, and later he eats with them. This is so important!

Jesus' resurrection is the forerunner, a foretaste of the resurrection promised to those who place their faith and trust in him. The promise of our resurrection is not that we will float ghost like to recline on a heavenly cloud, where we will be clothed in white and have angel wings, playing a harp 24/7 while singing Amazing Grace on endless repeat. That picture of life after death has nothing to do with the bible. Thank God!

Like Jesus, we will have a physical body. Like Jesus, we will be recognizably us – but still different. We will have a new body, free of the limitations of the past. We will never be more ‘us’ than when we experience our physical resurrection. Then I will be the ‘me’ God always intended me to be.

Paul puts it this way in 1 Corinthians, after saying our heavenly bodies will have one sort of splendor, while our earthly bodies have a different kind of splendor – just like the sun and moon are different and yet magnificent in their own way:

The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power.
(1 Corinthians 15:42-43)

The promise of the resurrection is that we will have an imperishable, glorious and powerful new body. Hallelujah!

Jesus greets the started disciples with the most common greeting of the day, one that is still common in the Middle East today, ‘Peace be with you.’ But there was something deeper going on. He was reminding the disciples of the promise he had made to them days earlier:

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you.
(John 14:27)

Recognising Jesus, the disciples fear is replaced with overwhelming joy – literally translated, they were flooded with joy. Again days earlier, before his arrest and crucifixion, Jesus had promised his disciples this:

I tell you the truth, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy.
(John 16:20)

Here is where I want to make my first observation: Jesus’ resurrection COMFORTS us.

Specifically, it comforts us with peace that passes understanding and joy that is overwhelming. The peace and joy of God are intertwined. They are inseparable one from the other. You see:

Jesus’ peace is not the absence of conflict, but the presence of joy.

When we encounter the resurrected Jesus we realize that death does not have the final word, evil has not triumphed, the grave has been conquered, that any trials we suffer will be momentary and that a restored heaven and earth will be our final and eternal home.

When we encounter the resurrected Jesus, we will be surprised by joy. GK Chesterton said that:

Surprise is the secret of joy.
(GK Chesterton)

Jesus’ appearance so surprised the disciples grief gave way to joy. And the same can be true for us.

So here is my question; when were you last surprised by joy? For some of us, we can’t actually remember the last time we experienced true, soul deep joy. I read a startling fact the other day. Did you know that studies show that on average children laugh 400 times a day? By comparison, adults laugh just 15 times a day.

Now, there may well be many reasons for this, but can I suggest that one may well be that our sin-saturated world squeezes joy from us like water from a sponge, leaving us spiritually parched and dry.

One of the foundational documents of our tradition, the Westminster Catechism, famously asks the question, ‘What is the chief end of man?’ And the answer?

The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy God forever.

We were created to enjoy – to find our joy – in God. Put another way, God is both the source and the satisfaction of our spiritual thirst. Four hundred years ago, Jonathan Edwards put it so much better than me:

The enjoyment of [God] is the only happiness with which our souls can be satisfied.... Fathers and mothers, husbands, wives, or children, or the company of earthly friends are but shadows, but enjoyment of God is the substance. These are but scattered beams, but God is the sun. These are but streams, but God is the fountain. These are but drops, but God is the ocean.
(Jonathan Edwards)

So let me ask you again, when were you last surprised by joy? Have you ever been?

You were created to enjoy God, to encounter God, to experience God – and when we do we will overflow with joy, just as the disciples did in that locked room.

God continues to surprise me with his joy. The first time was when as a thirteen year old church kid who knew all the Sunday school answers about God, I prayed a low expectation but honest prayer in the annex of my families caravan. In that moment I opened my life up for the first time to the possibility of grace as I stuttered out the words, 'God, if you're real – I want you in my life.' As soon as the words were out of my mouth I was flooded with an avalanche of emotions – peace, love – joy. I wept – no I sobbed - tears of joy for more than an hour, so much so I woke up my startled parents. In that moment I encountered the crucified and resurrected Jesus and I was comforted with his peace that passes understanding and joy that is overwhelming.

Let's read on:

Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."
(John 20:21-23)

This is one of the more disputed and contested passages in the New Testament.

What is actually happening as Jesus breathes on the disciples with the words, 'Receive the Holy Spirit'?

How is this different to the Day of Pentecost fifty days later when the Holy Spirit fell on the disciples with power?

Bible scholars suggest there are three options:

Option One – In breathing on the disciples, Jesus is prophetically symbolizing what will happen at Pentecost when the Holy Spirit will fall on them.

Option Two – Jesus breathes a partial infilling of the Holy Spirit into the disciples, when on Pentecost that will be baptized – immersed - filled to running over with the Spirit. The great reformer John Calvin suggested the disciples were only sprinkled with his grace and not saturated with his full power.

Option three, when Jesus breathed on them, the disciples received as much of the Holy Spirit as they did on the Day of Pentecost.

My conclusion is that option one is right; that Jesus was symbolically representing what would later happen on the day of Pentecost. One person put it this way; when Jesus breathed on the disciples the church was conceived, on the Day of Pentecost the church was given birth.

But Jesus doesn't just breathe on the disciples; he also commissions them:

As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.

The resurrection of Jesus COMMISSIONS us.

As the Father sent the Son into the world to proclaim and demonstrate the height, depth and breadth of the love of God, so too the church is sent to testify to the same.

As the Father sent the Son into the world to give his life as a sacrifice for many, so too the church is to sacrifice every other agenda other than to point people to Jesus.

God gathers the church and empowers it to be scattered in Jesus' name and for Jesus' fame.

The church is not to stay behind locked doors, but be sent into the streets of the world with a message on its lips and a fire in its heart.

Jesus commissions not just a select few of the disciples, but all of them. As it was then, so it is today. Jesus doesn't just commission pastors or elders or church leaders to share the gospel; he commissions his church – all of us.

We are his sent ones.

More than anything else I long that each and every person that calls Newlife home has an encounter with Jesus that overwhelms them with joy. But that is where the story begins, not ends. The gift of joy we receive is a gift to be shared.

Faith in Jesus must be personal but it cannot be private.
(Rick Warren)

Our joy is a gift to be shared.

Last Monday I was scrolling through Facebook when I came across this post from Stu Herschell- Adair. Stu and his wife Jo serve God with YWAM in Cambodia. Our church supports them financially as one of our Acts 1:8 mission partners. This is what Stu says in his post:

10 years ago today I made the decision to love and follow Jesus at a Newlife Uniting Church Easter camp. I have never once looked back on that choice. Thank you God for the adventure that it has been following you to some 30+ countries, providing me with a beautiful wife, and adorable son, and a heart full of love for you. So grateful to God that he sent his son to die for a sinful guy like me. So thankful for the life he gives.

I am so thankful for Stu and Jo.

I am thankful for Daniel Spears, a young chiropractor from our church who is serving women and girls in northern Thailand saved out of sex trafficking and who are now discovering new life in Jesus' name.

I am thankful for Kylie Varcoe, a teacher from our church, who is on a YWAM mercy ship serving the poorest of the poor in the Pacific in Jesus' name.

I am thankful for Bill and Olga Pilarinos and their family, a wonderful family from our church who on New Years Day left everything behind, to serve God's call on the mission field.

I am thankful for Jon and Elin Morris, who were youth pastors in our church, whose ministry touches thousands of young people through YWAM in Hawaii and who through the ministry of Justice Water, transforms the lives of literally tens of thousands.

I am so thankful.

These are the sent ones. But here is the thing; so are you if you have encountered the resurrected Jesus. Jesus sends everyone who bears his name into mission – no exceptions.

God has sent you to your family, to your street, to your work place, to your school, to your university, to your club, to your friendship circle with the express purpose of sharing the good news of Jesus. You see:

God did not save us so we could settle into middle-class conformity.
God saved us to send us into gospel proclaiming adventures.

Every day is pregnant with possibilities of living out our 'sent-ness' as we look for opportunities to give reason for the hope that God has given us through Jesus.

Church is not a place where we come to consume a religious good or service. Church is a community being equipped to be co-laborers with Jesus in his mission in the world.

The resurrected Jesus comforts us, commissions us and finally, he confronts us. Let's read the final part of today's passage:

Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!"

But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe."

A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"
(John 20:24-28)

It's Sunday a week after Jesus resurrection and a week after appearing to his disciple's in a locked room. Thomas had been missing a week earlier. He's heard the stories and seen the excitement in his friends. He wants to believe, but he can't. He needs evidence – concrete evidence before he will believe the unbelievable.

Despite their encounter with Jesus a week earlier, the disciples are still fearful and so Jesus again appears miraculously in their midst and gently rebukes Thomas for doubting. Encountering Jesus personally, Thomas believes and makes the greatest confession of faith in all of John's gospel:

"My Lord and my God!"

The words Thomas uses are profoundly meaningful for two reasons. First, the language he uses is the same used in the Old Testament to name and describe Yahweh – Israel's God.

Thomas is declaring that Jesus isn't just a resurrected man; he is God!

Second, in the first century Roman Emperors would often assign themselves divine titles. For example, Emperor Domitian, who ruled at the same time John was writing his gospel liked to be addressed this way in Latin:

Dominus et deus noster
'Our Lord and God!'

Thomas was declaring what the church would declare courageously and at great cost; Caesar is not Lord – Jesus is Lord, Caesar is not the king – Jesus is the King of kings and the Lord of lords!

What convinced Thomas? It was hearing and seeing; hearing his own name spoken by the unmistakable voice of Jesus and seeing his nail-pierced hands and spear-wounded side.

Jesus commissions – sends us into the world to tell his story – the gospel story. Carrying the scars of his crucifixion, Jesus confronts us with the scandal that the story we tell is of a saviour not just risen, but crucified and risen!

God's don't die. God's don't parade their scars. It was unthinkable 2000 years ago and in many ways still is now. Os Guinness puts it this way:

Christianity is the only religion whose God bears the scars of evil.
(Os Guinness)

The Apostle Paul knew that the message Jesus sends us with of him crucified and risen is strange, offensive, difficult and hard. But it is also the truest truth of the universe. Here is what he said to the Corinthians:

We preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

(1 Corinthians 1:23-24)

When we point people to Jesus, we must make sure that ultimately we tell them the Easter story and all it can mean for them; that Jesus died for them, that Jesus was raised for them, that Jesus still bears the scars for them.

A provincial zoo in China was shut down suddenly last year. It happened when visitors discovered that the zoo's lion was actually a dog posing as a lion. The fraud came to light when a mother and her young son visited the zoo and the animal labeled an "African lion" starting barking.

Zookeepers admitted that the so-called lion was actually a Tibetan mastiff, a large dog with a furry brown coat. They also admitted that other zoo animals had been mislabeled. Apparently there was a white fox in a leopard's den and another dog being passed off as a wolf.

A spokesperson for the zoo said, "We're doing our best in tough economic times."

In tough times spiritually it is tempting for churches and church leaders to preach a message that looks like the gospel, but actually on close inspection, isn't. We can be tempted water down the gospel message by avoiding confronting truths like the fact that Jesus died a shameful death to take away the sins of the world. At the heart of the gospel message we are sent to proclaim is the cross. We preach nothing more or less than Christ crucified and risen.

Anything else is trying to pass off a Tibetan Mastiff as an African lion.

Last Sunday night at 12two Ralph told a wonderful story I want to finish with this morning. Boyd Varty is a South African wildlife activist whose family owns a game reserve. Last year he told the story of how years ago one of the guides he works with, Solly, saved his life. Let me tell you the story in Boyd Varty's own words:

It was a hot day and we found ourselves down by the river, and because of the heat I had taken off my shoes and rolled up my pants and I walked into the water. Solly remained on the bank. The water was clear, running over sand, and we turned and we began to make our way upstream. A few meters ahead of us there was a place where a tree had fallen out of the bank and its branches were touching the water, and it was shadowy. If it had been a horror movie, people in the audience would start saying, 'Don't go in there! Don't go in there!'

Of course, the crocodile was in the shadows. The first thing you notice when a crocodile hits you is the ferocity of the bite. Wham – it hits me by my right leg, it turns me, I throw my hand up and I'm able to grab a branch. It's shaking me violently. It's a very strange sensation having another creature try to eat you, and there are few things that promote vegetarianism like that.

Solly on the bank sees that I'm in trouble, he turns and begins to make his way to me. The croc continues to shake me. It goes to bite me a second time. I notice a slick of blood in the water around me that gets washed downstream. As it bites the second time I kick. My foot goes down its throat and it spits me out. I pull myself up into the branches, and as I come out of the water I look over my shoulder. My leg from the knee down is mangled beyond description. The bone is cracked and the meat is torn up. I make an instant decision I will never look at that again.

As I come out of the water, Solly arrives at a deep section – a channel between us. He knows – he sees the state of my leg – he knows that between him and me is a crocodile. And I tell you this man does not slow down for one second. He wades straight into the channel to above his waist. He gets to me. He grabs me...and puts me on his shoulders, he turns and he walks me up the bank, he lays me down and he pulls his shirt off and he wraps it around my leg. He picks me up a second time and walks me to a vehicle and he's able to get me to medical attention. And I survive.

How many people do you know who will go into a deep channel of water that has a crocodile in it to help you?

For Solly, it was natural as breathing.

Every time we gather we celebrate the One who did not brave crocodile infested waters to save us, but plunged into a world mired by sin, the One who willingly embraced the awful, painful of a sin-soaked cross in order to win us back from death. Not only that, he has the scars to prove it.

