

SERMON FOR EASTER
(Cape Town - 23 March 2008)

Text: ¹⁴ And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.... if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. ¹⁸ Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. ¹⁹ If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men. ²⁰ But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep (1 Cor.15:14, 17-20)

I am quite sure that most of you will have heard about the horrific accident that took place on the N1 highway earlier this last week. Coming down from the M5 onto the N1 a huge truck - obviously going much too fast - overturned as it entered the inside lane of the N1 highway.

Travelling towards the city on the N1 were two ladies, most probably going to work as they did every morning. But this morning they wouldn't return alive. Maybe they saw the truck coming, slowly titling towards them. But because of the traffic there was no escape for them. The truck crashed right on top of their car, crushing it like a tin can, reducing it to a height of less than a meter. Both ladies were dead on the spot.

Just for one moment visualise yourself in that car. Listening to the radio or chatting away to your travelling companion, you see this big truck coming and before you can really blink your eye you are dead. There is no chance to call the family to say a final good-bye, nor is there a chance to take make right what was wrong in your life.

Or visualise yourself as the husband of one of two ladies. A police officer phones you at work and says: "There was an accident on the N1". You say: "Yes, I heard about it on the radio." And the officer says: "Sorry, sir, we believe that one of the deceased was your wife. Would you please come immediately to identify the body."

As you all know: This is not a made-up story. This is real. This is what actually happened in Cape Town this last week. And with these two ladies there are many more that lost their lives in the past week.

This raises the question: What are we celebrating today? And why is this Easter day for us Christians such an important day?

Let me start off by telling you what Easter is "not" about. This may come as a bit of surprise. But we are not celebrating today that *God is alive* - at least not in this general sense, as I have just said it. That God is alive is not unique to our Christian faith.

Fact is, in all religions of this world, people believe not only that there is a god, but also that this god is alive. The Hindus believe it. The Muslims believe it. The Buddhists believe in. In ancient times the Persians, Greeks and Romans believed it. The only exception to these are really the atheists, those who don't believe in the existence of God at all. But those who believe that there is a god, generally also believe that this God is alive.

But as I said, this is not what we are celebrating on Easter Day. And if we - here in our church -

should sing today with joyful hearts: God is alive - alleluia, God is alive - alleluia! we are not expressing anything unique at all.

So what is Easter? What are we celebrating?

We are celebrating that “Jesus Christ has risen today.” At first this statement may not seem very different, to what we have just said. But fact is, the difference is huge.

What characterises our Christian faith is that we don’t simply believe in “a god”, whom we share with all other religions. We believe in a very specific God, a specific revelation. It is the God of whom we firmly believe that he came to us in the person of Jesus Christ, the man from Nazareth.

What this means Paul states in our sermon text in a single, all capturing line. He says: “***If Christ*** (not somebody else) ***has not been raised, your faith is futile; (and) you are still in your sins.***”

I would like to meditate with you on this line, by dissecting it and rephrasing it into two positive statements:

First: Easter declares: Your faith in Christ, your trust in him, is vindicated.

In the Gospel of John there is a touching story of a brother that died. His name was Lazarus. He had two sisters, Mary and Martha. Both of these sisters were unwedded. In ancient societies this meant not only that Lazarus was the bread-winner, but he was also their legal protector. So when Lazarus died it was huge blow to them. Just before he died they send word to Jesus that he should come immediately. But when Jesus eventually arrived in Bethany, it was too late. Lazarus had been dead for four days.

The two sisters cried: “If you had only been here, he would not have died”, they said. And when Jesus tried to comfort them, Martha said: “(I know) ***we will rise again in the resurrection at the last day***” (Jh.11:24). And Jesus said to her: “(No, Martha, I want you do understand) ***I am the resurrection and the life.***” Not there is a general resurrection of all people as the Pharisee believed. “***I am the resurrection and the life***” - that is what God has ordained.

In a congregation where these was doubt about Jesus’ resurrection, Paul turns these words around and says: If Jesus did not rise, then everything that we Christians are doing is futile. Jesus’ words to Martha: “I am the resurrection and the life” are meaningless and empty. But they are not. Having said these words, Jesus walked to the tomb of Lazarus and shouted: “Come out”. And he did. And when Jesus died, three days later that tomb was empty. He had risen.

We are celebrating today, *not* that there is a resurrection of the dead, but that “Jesus Christ” *is this* resurrection and that our faith in him will not be disappointed.

If however, as some have said, it never happened, Jesus never rose from the dead, then don’t join a Christian church. You are wasting your time. But if it did happen, as Paul, Peter, John and all the disciples testified then your Christian faith is not a “part-time” activity, something you do every now and again, when you have time, but it is central.

We are celebrating today: The way to God is through Jesus Christ. He is the resurrection and the

life. That is the way God has ordained it.

Secondly: Easter declares: You have forgiveness. Paul says: ***“If Christ was not raised... you are still in your sins.”***

We need to listen carefully. The way to God is not being a bit religious. The way to God is not good ethics or morals as advocated by most religions of the world. The Bible says: ***“We all fall short of the glory of God”***. A bit of good, does not remove the wrong. We need forgiveness. We need to be made “right” with God. The Bible calls this “justification”. That is when a judge stands up in court and says: “Your penalty has been paid. You are free”. That is what we need.

When Jesus died on the cross it wasn't an accident. It was the result of a “changed heart” on God's part. The cross says: “God has changed” (new covenant): There is no “eye for an eye” anymore. But in Jesus God takes the punishment for my sin upon himself. He suffers. He dies... so that I can live. He reconciles the world to himself by declaring: “I forgive you and I will not deal with you according to your sins.”

And this is why celebrating Easter without celebrating Good Friday makes no sense at all. There is no Easter without Good Friday. On Good Friday he died for me. On Easter, the one who died for my sins, was raised so that I may know: His forgiveness is real.

“If he was not raised”, Paul says, “there is not forgiveness of sins.’ Choose your religion. But you are not going to make it.

Easter gives me courage to stop justifying or hiding my sins, but to be honest. Crucified next to Jesus were two criminals. The one was mocking Jesus. The other one rebuked him saying: ***“We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But (not this man), he has done nothing wrong.”*** And then he turned to Jesus and said: ***“Remember me when you come into your kingdom”***. And Jesus declared: ***“I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise”*** (Lk.23:42-43).

When you put your faith in Jesus, Paradise has started. You can be killed on the N1 highway, but paradise has started.

I don't know whether the two ladies killed were Christians or not. But if they were, they belong to the one who died for them, who is the resurrection and the life. And it can be celebrated today, despite the hurt.

Paul leaves us with one final thought. He says: ***“If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men.”*** If you trust Christ only because you want this life of yours to prosper, you are to be pitied. God aims much higher. Our hope in Christ reaches far beyond this world. It is eternal.

And that is why we can celebrate Easter joyfully, not matter what hardships we face, or what sorrow we need to bear. “Jesus Christ” is alive. The one who died for me, has risen. Nothing else matters. Halleluiah. Amen.

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