

SERMON FOR EASTER
(Cape Town - 11 April 2010)

Text: I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. ***For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures,*** and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born. For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me. Whether, then, it was I or they, this is what we preach, and this is what you believed. (1 Corinthians 15:1-11)

I am glad it is Easter and that we can meditate on the topic of “resurrection”. As you may know, my family had more than one encounter with death in the past year. First my dad died. He had reached a good age and as a family we were grateful for the many years that we had him. But then about a month ago my nephew and god-child, Dietmar Böhmer, the only son of my second sister was killed.

My dad’s death was easy to accept - although it still hurts that he isn’t around. But we all know (and we need to accept it), one day we will all die. But the death of my nephew is a different story. He was in the prime of his life. He was only 24 years old. His whole life still seemed to be ahead of him. His flat had just been renovated and his parents expected the announcement of his engagement any day - with a very lovely young lady. Today he is dead. And people are still weeping and struggling to come to terms with his death.

Death always raises the question of life *after death*. Is there such a thing? And if there isn’t, does anything in life make sense? It seems to make very little sense to me to work hard, to build up a reputation, or to gather possessions if one day I *just die*.

Linda Macqueen, the editor of the Australian church magazine, *The Lutheran*, compares life without resurrection to the senselessness of raising dugs for a dug shooting competition. Maybe you have seen something similar. But dug shooting is a big thing in Australia. The dugs are raised with one goal in mind, to shoot them. So one day unsuspectingly they are set free, just to be shot down. Some are wounded and are handicapped for life. Others are killed. Well, life just doesn’t seem to make any sense if dugs or we, human beings, are raised *just to die one day again*.

As a result of this “senselessness” man has always envisaged some form of life after death. Some believe in reincarnation: When my body dies, my immortal spirit finds a new body. Other have spiritualised “resurrection”. In other words, my body dies, but my spirit or soul continuous forever.

This is largely what the ancient people in Corinth believed and this is also how they interpreted the resurrection of Jesus. For them a “bodily” resurrection was of no importance. That Jesus’ body could not be found in the tomb on that first Easter morning was totally immaterial to them. For them resurrection was a *spiritual* thing - not even confined confined to life *after death*. They believed, you could share in the resurrection *right now*. Through meditation your soul could leave your body and “connect” with the transcendental world, now already.

But this is not the testimony of Scripture. And it is a good thing if we make some time today, to consider what we as Christians really believe.

It should be noted that for us not only “resurrection” as such, but the resurrection of Jesus Christ is important. Just after our sermon text, Paul writes: **“If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith”** (v.14). In others words, if we don’t believe in the actual resurrection of Christ, nothing we talk about here in Church makes sense. It also means, you can have as many spiritual experiences as you like, if Christ was not raised they all mean nothing. For us Easter is first and foremost not about resurrection as such, but the resurrection of Christ and what that means for us.

Paul therefore starts this passage, written to the Corinthians, with these words:

For what I received I passed on to you... that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.

Apart from the reference to Christ there are two important lines in what Paul says here. The first one **is “according to the Scriptures”**. In other words, what I am telling you, Paul says, is not new. What happened on the Easter weekend was to be expected. It had been planed all along. But even more important is the reference to the **“Christ (who) died for our sins according to the Scriptures” - he was raised.**

This line is not only important it is central. If I, for example, believe in the resurrection of mother Theresa, or Martin Luther King, or my dad, or my nephew - (it is exciting news but) it has no impact on me personally.

The Easter question is: Did God raise the one who died for my sins? If he didn’t raise him, then I am still stuck with my sins in all eternity. But if he did raise the one *who died for my sins* there is “forgiveness”.

And that is the question “you” need to answer. Not, do you believe in life after death (in whatever form it comes) . But do you believe that God raised the one from the dead *who died for your sins*? That is the critical question.

Now to provide an answer for such a critical question we usually seek some form of “proof”. And indeed in this passage Paul - at first glance - seems to provide such proof, when he writes:

.... and (that) he appeared to Peter (who was the pillar of the ancient church) and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five

hundred of the brothers at the same time.... Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

Well, that is a whole group of people that saw Jesus alive.

But unfortunately for the critical human mind that is *no proof*. Scientists will tell you for something to be proved you do not only need multiple people attesting to it, you also need independent witnesses - in other words, people that couldn't have colluded. But a careful look at this list of witnesses will show, they were all "believers". There are no outsiders that saw Jesus alive. No Herod or Pontius Pilate. Why didn't Jesus show himself to these people?

The answer is simple - as we repeatedly noted on Good Friday: God works with "relationships". And a relationship is always based on trust, not proof. If people trust God, they experience miracles. But if they demand proof (as the Pharisees and Scribes did), they are shown nothing.

Furthermore "faith" is always bound to "Scripture". All the people that saw Jesus alive experienced a "confirmation" of what was *written in Scripture* all along. The resurrection of Jesus is not about "proof" (God does not proof himself), but "confirmation". In other words, there is a certain sequence of events. First, there is Scripture. God says: "This is my plan for mankind" And then there is confirmation: "What God said all along has happened". If you take Scripture out of the equation, sit under a tree somewhere and wait for God to confirm Christ's resurrection, you will sit forever.

The problem why we so often doubt the resurrection of Jesus, is that we don't make enough time to reflect on Scripture. When Jesus walked with those two disciples from Emmaus, who could not understand what happened in Jerusalem, he says to them: **"How foolish you are (didn't you read the Scriptures)?"** (Lk. 23:25). And then **"beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself"** (v.26). And once the Scriptures were in their hearts, the scales fell from their eyes, and they recognised him.

As we read, more than 500 people experienced Jesus alive. And they saw him because the Scriptures were in their hearts all along. Something happened that confirmed: It is true what is written. He *is* alive.

These confirmations have not stopped. Throughout the centuries people testify, not "life after death", but that the one who died for their sins, is indeed alive.

You all know the great 18th century musician and composer, Georg Frederic Handel. It is reported that in 1741 he was one night roaming the streets of his home town ready to take his own life after being rejected by the English Nobility. But on returning to his apartment he saw an envelope stuck under his door. He opened it and started reading. The letter was entitled: *A Spiritual Oratorio* with a note from the sender: "The Lord commissioned me..." (In other words, "The Lord had told me to give it to you").

Handel started to read the words of the oratorio. It was a meditation on Jesus (recorded

in Scripture - in the book of Isaiah): ***"He was despised and rejected by men ... nobody had compassion on him... but he trusted God ... and God did not abandon him... I know my Redeemer lives."***

When Handel read this - something happened. He had an encounter with the resurrected Christ. Wonderful tunes suddenly began to overwhelm his inner soul. He grabbed a pen and paper. He wrote page after page. The next morning his servant found him sleeping over his desk. Quietly he left the tray with food in front of him. On returning at lunch, the tray hadn't been touched. Handel was writing and writing. He wrote almost non-stop for 24 days. Then he put his pen down and fell exhausted into bed. He had just completed his most well-known music composition: *The Messiah*.

Handel himself presented *The Messiah* 34 times. The last time he heard it, was on Good Friday 1759. It was always his wish that he would die on the day that Christ died for him. His wish was granted. He died on Good Friday. And today Handel's "Halleluja, Halleluja, Halleluja resonates in our ears". The one who died for us, is alive. Amen.

Dieter Reinstorf