

St Mark's Lutheran Church
Easter Sunday
Pastor Ben Pfeiffer
John 20:1-18

Greeting

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and our Risen Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen. He is risen. He is risen indeed. Our sermons for Holy Week have focussed on the 'The Finality of Easter,' how definitive and decisive these events are for us as Christian people. Thursday, we looked at Jesus' final meal, Friday his final moments and today his final victory. Let us pray.

Introduction

What is your greatest ever victory? Perhaps it was a competition you won, a game, a sport, a raffle, a contest, an argument. What is your greatest ever victory? Mine is simple. It's the Adelaide Lutheran B Grade Premiership in 2011, against Elizabeth, at Kilburn Oval. I won't bore you with the details, unless you ask me privately, and then I will bore you with as many as you like!

What is your greatest ever victory? It could be in your work life or family life or voluntary service. There are many kinds of achievements and victories. You might have achieved something even better than a B Grade Premiership! But it's interesting how all of them pale into insignificance, when compared with the victory we are talking about today, the victory of Jesus Christ over death, on Easter Sunday.

They don't even come close. They aren't even in the same category. And yet the joy and satisfaction associated with any victory, gives us some small sense of what the first Christians experienced, as they came to believe that Jesus was alive again. This is the victory to end all victories, and it involves our heads, our hearts, and whole lives, this victory over the grave.

The victory over our heads

Firstly, our heads. In many ways this is a victory that is over our heads, because it is beyond comprehension and calls into question our natural ways of thinking. The resurrection is a hard thing to accept rationally and that was the case for the first believers too. We tend to think it was easier for them. They were there. They weren't so scientifically minded. They were more superstitious. They expected miracles and healings and why not a resurrection? But it's not quite that simple!

These people came to faith through heartache and hardship, through serious reflection on Scripture and the evidence they saw and the interactions they had. It wasn't easy for them. No victory is easy. The resurrection is a challenge to all people of all times and all places. It challenges our thinking, our expectations, our rational thought patterns, our worldviews. That's partly the point. This is not normal. This is not every day. This is something different.

A recent survey of Australians suggested that 44% of them believe in Jesus' resurrection, in some sense, which is quite encouraging. The flip side was that half of those surveyed did not even believe Jesus of Nazareth was an actual historical figure, which is remarkable, given how much historical evidence there is for the existence of Jesus, in and outside the Bible. I sometimes tell my confirmation students there is more evidence that Jesus existed than that they exist!

The scene that first Easter Sunday, with Mary Magdalene arriving at the tomb, seeing the stone removed, telling Peter and John, "*They have taken the Lord... and we don't know where they have put him!*" is initially one of confusion and uncertainty. There is a lot of thinking through still to do. Peter and John race to the tomb. John mentions that he outran Peter. He's not going to let that little victory go unnoticed!

Once there, they look in and around and examine things. The open tomb. The folded cloth. John believes but he also mentions that up until then, '*They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.*' They had been told but they didn't understand, it hadn't sunk in, they hadn't grasped it. There are limits to what our minds can grasp.

The victory over our hearts

The resurrection is a victory over our heads, but it's also a victory over our hearts. Mary remains outside the tomb and what does she do? She weeps. She does what anyone of us would do, what is natural to do, when confronted by the reality of death and the added confusion of a seemingly desecrated tomb. She weeps. She grieves. She is overcome with emotion.

It is important that we let people weep; that we give people space to grieve. It is important that people know they have a God who is not uncaring or unkind or void of emotion. Jesus' wept, remember, right before the resurrection of Lazarus. Now Mary weeps, right before she hears of the resurrection of her Lord. Life with Jesus, like life without Jesus, can be an emotional rollercoaster. There are ups and downs. There are limits to what our hearts can handle. And yet, our Christian

hope reminds us that we should always be ready to have our natural thoughts and feelings interrupted. That sometimes the roller coaster comes to a grinding halt, and God offers us rest and relief when we least expect it.

"Woman, why are you crying?" The angels say. Isn't it obvious? *"Who is it you are looking for?"* a strange man says. Isn't it obvious? She pleads with him to tell her where Jesus is, to give her some direction, some hope in her emotional turmoil! He says to her, *"Mary."* *"Teacher."* In an instant, her grief turns to joy. She is 'surprised by joy,' as CS Lewis writes. The resurrection is a victory over our heads, but it also a victory over our hearts, as it invites us to believe that death and grief and sadness do not get the final say, that there is always more to the human experience than meets the eye.

We talk about following our hearts. The prophet Jeremiah would urge caution in that regard. He says, 'the heart is deceitful above all things' (17:9). Watch your hearts. Guard your hearts. Express what's in your hearts. Pour them out to God. But don't follow them. You have someone better to follow. He calls you by name. He knows you better than you know you. He knows what's in your hearts and he loves you all the same. That's why he died and rose again. That's the heart of God for you.

The victory over the grave

Finally, the resurrection of Jesus Christ, is a victory over the grave. *'The last great enemy is death'* (1 Cor 15:26). Saint Paul knew that. Mary knew it. Peter and John knew it. And you and I know it. Death remains the one great force in our lives over which we have very little control and from which there is usually no coming back. Until now!

Mary races back to the disciples to tell them, *"I have seen the Lord!" "I have seen the Lord!"* A humble proclamation of an incredible victory, the victory over the grave. We may not always think like winners. We may not always feel like victors. Sometimes we might think and feel the very opposite. But the resurrection triumphs over our heads and our hearts, instructing and directing one, while healing and helping the other.

The enduring message of Easter is that his victory is our victory. It is his triumph, but we get the spoils. It is his win, but we get the crown on our heads. It is his achievement, but we get the joy in our hearts. *'Thanks be to God,'* writes Paul, *'who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ'* (1 Cor 15:55). Amen.