

# Easter Sermon

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## Luke 24 1 ff.

A friend of my sister's was travelling in the car the other day just before Easter. And the children were asking her about Easter and what it was all about. She told them that it was a time when we remember that Jesus died, killed by the Romans, and then was raised back to life. One of her younger children, Indy, asked her: "What, did they know he was God's Son?" and her mother said; "Yes that's why they killed him." Indy replied: "See, that's why you don't brag."

While it's great that Indy was able to take some kind of lesson out of Jesus' death, I think she didn't quite get the main point. Because understanding and believing the main message of Jesus' death and resurrection can make a huge difference to our understanding of life, and the way that we live it. Some philosophers have said that the fear of death is the greatest of all fears – and is actually behind all of our other fears. If you are afraid of heights, or deep water or spiders (like I am) or clowns or anything else, behind those fears is probably a fear that these things will kill you. And death is something that we all live with in our lives, but often as something that we push out of our minds; something that we avoid thinking or talking about. Many psychologists have commented on our Western culture, in particular, as one that represses the idea of death. We talk about it in quiet voices, or we hardly mention it at all. We use euphemisms like "passed away" to soften the harsh reality of it. We often do not know how to talk to people who have experienced it closely, feeling anxiety about whether to say something or not, and feeling unsure of what we should or shouldn't say.

This avoidance of death has been argued to be at the heart of a lot of our striving and seeking as human beings. We seek to accumulate fortunes, leave behind legacies, be remembered for our achievements, build something in our lifetimes that will last in some way, as if to somehow cheat death or overcome it in some way.

But as philosophers like Nietzsche and other nihilists have argued; the reality of death is that we will all eventually one day be forgotten, and even if we are

remembered, we won't know about it. For these philosophers, the reality of death is that, if it is the end of us, then our lives really have no meaning, because whether we are rich or poor, good or bad, famous or unknown, in the end it all comes to nothing.

That is the fear and anxiety that sits somewhere in most of our unconscious thoughts, that we try to avoid by seeking pleasure, status, and trying to make a name for ourselves above other people, so that maybe, just maybe, we will be remembered amongst the billions of people who live and die on this planet.

But Jesus' death and more importantly, his resurrection changed all of this.

Jesus did not seek to be remembered. He did not seek to be rich or powerful or even popular. Rather he knew something that enabled him to hold his life lightly, playfully even, and that meant he felt no need to fight for his own needs or his own point of view. When arrested and questioned by the Romans, he said: "My kingdom is not of this world, My kingdom is from another place. I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth"

When Pilate asks him: What is this truth? Jesus does not answer him. Because his answer comes three days after he is killed. On Easter Sunday, Jesus rises again. But he is not just simply brought back to life. He appears now as something much more than he was: he appears and disappears at will, he can move through solid objects, he can travel huge distances at will. And when it is time for him to leave earth again, he doesn't die – he simply rises into a bright beam of light and ascends into a higher dimension that some call heaven.

And this changes everything; because Jesus tells us that this is who and what all of us really are. He says: "Do not let your hearts be troubled. My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am."

Of course, this is something that you either believe or don't believe. Today, many don't, but there are also many who do. A few years ago, at Easter, I told the story of Steve Jobs' death, and the way his family saw the promise of something more after death in the way that he died.

Today I have a better story. A personal story. My father died two weeks ago in the school holidays. He was only 70, but had Dementia in his last few years. He went unconscious on the Sunday a week before Easter, and we were told that he was in his last few days. And so, for 7 days we sat around his bed, caring for him and watching him die. In those first few days, while unconscious, he did some strange things. With his eyes closed, lying in bed, he would reach out his hands and try to grasp invisible things, and he would murmur things as if he was talking to someone or something that we could not see. My sister googled these symptoms, but because of the unit that I teach to many of you about death and the afterlife, I already knew what this meant: My sister was amazed to read that many people have these deathbed visions, and they will say that they have seen people they love who have died coming to collect them or help them to let go. The research says these visions happen in all cultures and religions.

So we sat around Dad's bed and we prayed, and we thanked those we knew in our family who had died for coming to be with Dad and help him. And as we prayed, we asked Dad that if it was possible that he might send us signs after he died that he was okay. This is something I know others have done and have been comforted by when they get signs.

Well, once we had prayed that, the light in the bathroom turned off and then on again. Just once. Again, those of you who have looked at the "What happens after death" unit in RST will know that is one of the ways that those who have died communicate with people – through electrical disturbances. It reassured us that something spiritual was going on. And so we asked Dad for more signs. A few days later, after 4 days of sitting with Dad and wondering when he was going to die, and of there being a few other things we considered signs happen, my sister was sitting beside Dad's bed doing the Wordle and the NYT mini-crossword. She stopped in her tracks

and said "Oh My God. Have any of you done the Wordle and the mini crossword?" I hadn't yet but it is something I do every day, so I opened the app and did them both. The Wordle was the word "Dirge" – which my sister had to look up the meaning of, and it is a song played at a funeral, and the mini crossword had this clue: "A time to die" and the answer was Easter.

We were all shocked. Did this mean God was telling us Dad was going to die on Easter? Well that is what happened. Three days later on Easter Sunday morning at 10.55, Dad died peacefully, as we sat around his bed. I was holding his hand. It was one of the most beautiful things I've seen, for reasons that I can't really put into words.

I already believed that Dad was going to go on living in a better place after he died. But the signs we saw – the ones I've told you about, and many others I haven't – certainly gave us all a lot more trust in that. I know I will be with him again one day.

And that is the hope that Jesus gave us on Easter. That none of us every really dies – we go on to a better place, a place that is more truly our home than this world. And if this is true, then we don't need to live with fear or anxiety. We don't need to amass a fortune or put our name in the history books. Because what we are will never end. And our lives are meaningful. The meaning of them is to love, and to learn how to love. Because that love is what we are, and that love will never end.

And so we celebrate Easter, because it changes everything. It is the good news that we cannot really lose, that everything will be okay in the end, that this existence is better than we could have ever imagined. So be hopeful, don't live to make yourself great, but live to love others and to be loved by others. That is the miracle of Easter.