

He is Risen Indeed

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning everyone. What a day! Easter Sunday, genuinely. Sunday, my favourite day of the week. Easter Sunday, my favourite day of the year. So I am perky this morning, which is great.

We gather together, don't we, to celebrate and remember the most significant of days. And right at its centre is the person who has undoubtedly made the biggest impact throughout world history.

In fact, here's Napoleon. Napoleon said this, I marvel that whereas the ambitious dreams of myself, Caesar and Alexander, should have vanished into thin air, that a Judean peasant, Jesus, should be able to stretch out his hands across the centuries and control the destinies of men and nations.

Such is the impact of this man, Jesus of Nazareth, through the generations. But maybe you're thinking to yourself, so what? So a lot of people have kind of made impacts on history throughout the years. So what?

Maybe put it to you like this. A friend of mine once asked me this question, pitch it to you, see what you think. You know, we've all got those kind of friends who don't do small talk.

[1 : 1 9] Maybe that's you, I don't know. The kind of person for whom chats about the weather and about cooking recipes and about public transport are just a waste of time.

Well, a number of years ago, one of those people, and I'm all up for those people, they asked me this question and here it is. Is there anything that if you found out it wasn't true would cause you to give up following Jesus?

Told you it was a biggie. Whoever you are here today, I wonder how you would answer that question. Is there anything that if you found out it wasn't true would cause you to give up following Jesus? Because I reckon this friend expected me to say no.

But for me it was really simple. It didn't take me long to think of this honest answer. The answer is most definitely yes. There are a number of things that if we fact check them and they turned out to be fake news, then I for one would check out of Christianity.

And the physical resurrection of Jesus is one of them. Now boys and girls, I don't know if you enjoy playing Jenga. I love playing Jenga. But I always like to think that the physical resurrection of Jesus is like a game of Jenga.

[2 : 3 1] That if you pulled out this Jenga brick, it would cause the whole thing to come crashing down. Christianity is not a kind of leave your brain at the door kind of gig.

There's plenty of solid ground beneath your feet. And if you're thinking about that, can I trust the evidence for this man Jesus? And everything that went on 2,000 odd years ago. We've got books at the back just giving away called Is Easter Unbelievable?

Really short. You can smash it in an afternoon. But we'll give you some really solid answers to some of your questions. But even then, let's suppose for a minute that he did.

Let's suppose that a man walked out of a tomb 2,000 odd years ago. Again, so what? Here's what I want to do. I want to give you two reasons why this is the best news that any human being could ever hope to hear.

And to get these two reasons, we need to step inside the shoes, or I guess they probably would have been sandals, of the person who's right at the heart of the drama in John 20.

[3 : 41] If you've got a Bible, come with me there. If you don't have one, grab one on the pews or get it on your phone. John chapter 20. The curtain opens on the original Easter Sunday morning at verse 1 of chapter 20.

And we meet this woman called Mary Magdalene. Now, Magdalene's not her surname. Magdala is the name of the little fishing village, which is on the west side of the Sea of Galilee, where she's from.

So I guess Magdalene is kind of like her nickname, the one that helps differentiate her from the other Marys who are around and on the scene at the time.

Now, we don't know an awful lot about Mary Magdalene, but we know one thing about her for sure. Is that she's got a really painful past. She is, when we first meet her in the Gospels, we're told that she was previously tormented by demons.

So that means that Mary is a really distressed soul when she first encounters Jesus in the Gospels. So there's Mary.

[4 : 48] There's no glittering career prospects for Mary. No Mr. Darcy coming to pick her up and take her to the prom. There's no healthcare system that's able to step in and tend to her needs.

And while the world turned away from Mary, this man Jesus turned towards her in compassion and love. I love that in the Gospels about Jesus, that those who in society are left feeling forgotten, they find that in Jesus Christ, they find someone to whom they truly matter.

You will not meet a more magnetically brilliant person in all of history. A man of boundless compassion. A man of towering charisma.

Jesus is humanity. The image of God as it was meant to be. No one reads the Gospels, reads about this man Jesus, and comes away thinking anything other than there is life to the full.

This man who perfectly loved the Lord God with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength. This man who perfectly loved his neighbor as himself. This man in whom truly was life.

[6 : 04] And Jesus met Mary. And he freed Mary from her demons. And he forgave her of her sin. What you've got to understand is that Jesus gave Mary life.

And to Mary, to know Jesus is life. Of course, that's the confession of everybody who comes to know him. That in him is life. To know him is life.

To Mary, Jesus is everything. And so she joins this band of disciples who travel with Jesus on his journeys. And she's heard him speak about how he's going to rise again on the third day.

And she's seen him enter Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. And she's seen him on the cross as he dies. And she witnesses Jesus being put in the tomb.

And the stone being rolled in front of it on the Friday. And don't miss the fact that between the last verse of chapter 19. And the first verse of chapter 20.

[7 : 09] A whole day has passed. Mary's sitting there. In her questions. She's in her doubts.

She's trying to pull sense from the wreckage. That is the heartbreak. The confusion. The disappointment. That is ravaging her soul. Is she thinks what on earth has happened.

To this man. Who gave me life. And when Sunday strikes. Do you see how she's up. And she's at the tomb early. And she sees that the stone's been rolled away.

She probably assumes that a band of grave robbers have been and have gone. And so she runs back to get the others. And Peter and John. They come running. I love how John tells you he got there first.

As if to say. Quicker runner. And Peter looks in. And Mary's absolutely right. Isn't she? There's no body there. This God who is father.

[8 : 12] He is son and he is spirit. This God who is three in one. This God who is. And who has eternally existed as a community of love. That's why we can say God is love.

Because he is father. He is son and he is spirit. And this God. And this God. Out of an overflow of his love. He creates the world. Out of nothing.

And as the pinnacle of his creation. He makes human beings. He makes them male and female. He makes them in his image. And that means whoever you are here today.

Every life matters. Every single life matters. Know that you are not an accident. Know whatever is going on in your life just now. You have wonderful dignity.

That you have beautiful purpose. Because you are made in the image of this God. You are made to know and enjoy the good God who made you. And who made us to image him to the world.

[9 : 16] And yet in the Bible story. What Adam and Eve do. Is they swap God's light for sin's darkness. They turn from life and they turn to death.

The Bible's word for that is sin. It's rejecting God and going our own way. And just like the apple. We would say the apple doesn't fall far from the tree.

All of us are born into this mess. All of us make this decision to turn away from God. It's not just sin. It's not just the stuff that happens out there. Do you not know in your life it's the stuff in here.

The stuff that rips us apart in here. I'm always amazed at my ability to hurt those who I would claim in this world to love the most. The stuff that goes on in here.

The stuff that fractures our relationships. And it all stems from the fact that we have rejected our creator. And amazingly God the offended party is also the initiating party.

[10 : 18] This God we see in the Bible. He commits himself there and then in Genesis 3 to deal with our sin and rebellion. He promises that he is going to send somebody to win us back.

And this person is going to do it through sacrifice. And if you're a Jew as the Bible story goes on that there's one day that you're reminded of this more than any other. And it's the day that we read about in Leviticus 16 called the day of the atonement.

You're reminded of your sin and you're reminded of God's faithfulness. Where God calls one man the great high priest. As he represents all the people.

And he calls them to go into one place. This place where God himself dwells. And to get himself ready to go on that one day into that one place.

He wears linen. It's a linen suit. Everything that he's wearing is linen. And he goes into that one place and he offers two goats. One goat is sacrificed in place of the people.

[11 : 28] And the other goat is set free to run into the wilderness. Symbolizing the fact that all our sins. All our mistakes. All our shame. Is taken away.

Is gone. Just like that goat is gone. And after his work the priest takes off the linen. And he leaves it there.

And he walks out of that tomb. As if to say. Job done. And that was just a warm up act.

For this. As Jesus dies on the cross on the Friday. Jesus is as it were the goat who takes your place. And he is the animal who took our sin far away.

And you think to yourself. But how do I know that that has worked? How do I know that transaction has gone through? I say that to the barista every time I buy a coffee and I pay my card.

[12 : 27] Has it gone through? And we have a little giggle that it did. God raising him from the dead. That was his rubber stamp. It was the seal of approval.

That yes. It has gone through. My son. You have done it. The father delights to raise the son. My son.

You have done it. Friends. If your trust is in this Jesus. Look at those linen cloths. That he has taken off. That he has left in that tomb.

And know that he has walked out. And know that the work of your great high priest is done. It is finished.

The empty tomb tells you. It tells me gloriously that something is finished. And you will never guess what the second heading is. It tells you as well.

[13 : 22] That something has started. Mary looks into the tomb. Do you see how she sees two angels inside at verse 12. And they ask her. Why are you crying?

They have taken my Lord. She says. Hear the anguish in her voice. And she turns around. And she sees the risen Jesus. In his resurrection body.

Isn't it incredible. That she doesn't recognize his face. Verse 15. Jesus asks her. Why are you weeping?

Who is it that you're looking for? Do you know what I love? I love a little bit of slapstick comedy. I like to think that's what that is in that scene. Because it's not like Jesus didn't know the answer to those questions. Who are you looking for?

Why are you looking for them? What is going on here? I love this. This is Jesus drawing out her heart. It's what he does.

[14 : 19] He draws alongside. And he draws out her heart. To help her see the earth shattering significance of what has just gone on in this moment.

I love that she thinks that he is the gardener. Love picturing Jesus holding a set of loppers and wearing a John Deere tractor sweatshirt. On one level Mary is so wrong.

But on another level. Whether Mary knew this or not. What she thought in this moment was so utterly profound. Because the Bible story, humanity's story starts in a garden.

It's a garden full of abundant and lavish goodness. Which tells you a lot about the kind of God who made it. God puts Adam and Eve there to work it.

To enjoy it. To develop it. As stewards. All the while knowing that they live in that loving relationship. As they're the creature and God is the creator.

[15 : 23] And sin has put humanity out of that garden. And so here in John 20. Mary is identifying the one who is making a way.

For there to be a new and a better garden. Where mankind and God. They live together in glorious harmony. And so as Jesus rises.

And as God installs him there. As heaven's king. The one to whom all knees will one day bow. What we have to understand is that the sun is rising on a brand new world.

Where all those who in faith would look to this Jesus as their savior and their king. Would know life eternal with this great God. Both now and then so fully and wonderfully in the new creation.

The perishable having given way to the imperishable. Our bodies subject to death. Now replaced forever with a body that is never to see decay.

[16 : 32] As Jesus walks out of that tomb. He is doing more than just pulling off a neat trick. Jesus as it were was putting the curse of sin.

And the inevitable destination of death. He was putting it into reverse gear. He was bringing in the dawn of a new age.

What we have to picture. Is it's almost as if when Jesus walks out that tomb. He takes a rope. And he throws it back into the tomb. And he says to all of creation.

And to all those who would trust him and have faith in him. Take hold. Because one day you're coming out with me. You see creation at the moment is like a full piece orchestra.

It's all set up. Ready to play. But it's sitting there in a darkened hall. Gathering dust. But on that day. It will gloriously play.

[17 : 34] Similarly our bodies right now. Death and decay. But then. They will be transformed to be like his glorious body. Never to see decay. And in that sense.

Do you see how Mary was bang on the money? Jesus is the gardener. Par excellence. Par excellence. And so truly verse 1. Here is the sun rising.

On a new day of the week. The first day of the week. And so finally Jesus reveals himself to Mary. Do you notice how Jesus draws Mary out?

This is wonderful. See what Jesus calls her. He doesn't go casual. He doesn't go generic. He goes personal. Do you see it? He says Mary. Here is the good shepherd in action.

The one who knows and who calls each of his people. Each of his sheep by name. And so contained in this one word. This one greeting Mary. It's packed full of significance.

[18 : 36] Here is Jesus saying Mary my child. I'm here. Take heart. Be comforted. Because your life is now in my hands.

And see while Mary doesn't recognize his face. To see how she recognizes his voice. And see how Jesus welcomes Mary in.

Her life might look insignificant in so many ways. But Jesus wants her to grasp the truth. That because of him she is now part of something truly magnificent.

That he is doing. Across the world. Down the ages. Do you see verse 17? He says Jesus says. Explains to her that he is going to ascend to his father.

And to who? Her father. To his God. And to who? Her God. So Mary once a stranger to God.

[19 : 34] Is now invited to come and to know her creator. As father. Mary is now part of this new global family of faith.

As Jesus gathers for himself through the ages. A people from all corners of the earth. A people from every tribe. Every tongue. Every nation.

Brought together. To have one voice. To be his church. Do you not find it amazing that all these years later. That we've even heard of Jesus. Jesus. Here's GK Chesterton.

Christianity has died many times and risen again. For it had a God who knew the way out of the grave. And notice just lastly how Mary.

Jesus sends Mary on. And it really is. It's a turn up for the books that Mary is a witness. To the first witness to the risen Jesus. That really is a surprise.

[20 : 36] But then again. This is the God of the Bible. He is in the business of lifting up the humble. And casting down the proud. Of using the weak and the seemingly insignificant things of this world.

To shame the strong. And so the God who chose shepherds. To be the first messengers of the news about the birth of his son.

He chooses this Mary. To be the first herald of the news about his risen son. And she runs. And boy does she run.

And proclaims the theme that's been the anthem of the church down the ages. And it's the one that fuels Christian mission. Across the globe. And it's this. That Christ is risen.

He is risen indeed. You know is there anything that if I learned it was false. It wasn't true. Would cause me to give up following Jesus. This undoubtedly would.

[21 : 37] But let me just tell you just as we close. Why this really really matters. Can I tell you about one of the things that made me chuckle a lot last year? Here it is.

The most famous. One of the most famous men the world has ever known. One of the biggest brains this world has ever known. A man called Stephen Hawking. He said this about life after death.

He said. There is no heaven or afterlife for broken down computers. That is a fairy story for people afraid of the dark. And you think to yourself cheery. But that's certainly one way isn't it?

Of trying to rationalise what goes on at the end of life. Of life. But I love this. Writing the foreword in his Stephen Hawking's biography. A guy called Eddie Redmayne.

He's one of my favourite actors. The actor who played Stephen Hawking in the film about his life. A theory of everything. Which is a really good watch if you're looking for something to watch tonight. Eddie Redmayne spent months and months studying the life of Stephen Hawking.

[22 : 38] Trying to get his mannerisms. Trying to get everything right. Just to play him in that part. And so he was asked to write the foreword to Stephen Hawking's biography. And he wrote this. He said. I hope Stephen is having fun up there.

Among the stars. And you think to yourself. Eddie. I don't think you knew Stephen at all. But I don't think you believe that. I certainly don't think Stephen Hawking believed that.

But it's really interesting isn't it? As we think about death. As we think about trying to make peace. With what goes on after this life. It doesn't matter how many times you sing Circle of Life by Elton John.

And it's a cracking song. As we try and make sense of it. The fact that life. As we pause to think about it. Is like a game of monopoly. That at the end of the game. All the pieces go back in the box. As we spend ourselves.

Trying to make sense of what this life is all about. Something in us deep down. And can't live with the full stop of the funeral. You know there's a book in the Bible called Ecclesiastes.

[23 : 39] And it's got this wonderful verse in it. That says God has put eternity into each and every human heart. Which means that we were made to live for so much more.

And this gives you the answer. To life's biggest question. What happens after we die? Is there more to life in this?

Is history just. And our world just plunging to an inevitable decay and death? Will this crucified and risen Jesus as he steps out of the tomb.

Hear him say to you that as scary as life gets. And as painful as it might be. Know that I live. And know that because of your faith in me.

Know that my victory. I share with you. This is the son of God who loved us. And who gave himself for us.

[24 : 39] And listen maybe you're here today. And I don't know what you think about this. Or what not. But if you want to investigate it. Can I just say there is no greater thing to do with your time.

Maybe even this morning is a morning where you think. No this Jesus. I want to put my faith in him. I just want to leave space for that this morning. So we're going to pray in a minute.

But I want you to respond. However God is prompting you to respond. Let's take great heart in the risen Jesus. Because there is no greater thing.

It really does that first song. That's why Christians have sang that down the ages. Life is worth the living. Just because healing. So why don't we pray. Let's just have a moment of silence. And then I'll lead us in prayer.

And we're going to stand. And we're going to sing a couple of songs. Just as we close. So Father we thank you for today.

[25 : 36] And even as we journey through the uncertainty of this life. Thank you that we look at the crucified. Risen and one day returning Jesus.

And our lives have meaning. And they have hope. Help us to look to him today. Whatever is going on in our hearts and our minds.

Father thank you that nothing is hidden from your sight. Lord I pray even today. That for someone today would be the day of salvation. That today would be the day when they put their trust in the one.

Who died for them. And who walked out the tomb. That they might have newness of life. Lord we thank you for Jesus. Help us we pray to look to him.

And we pray these things in his name. Amen.