Resurrection Sunday

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Preacher: Graham Heslop

[0:00] If you could open up your Bibles to Revelation chapter 1, that's where we're going to read from this morning, and then I'll ask you to keep that open, and we'll kind of circle back to it, and we'll finish with Revelation chapter 1.

So, wondering where that is, it's the last book in the Bible, so go right to the end, you'll find it, Revelation chapter 1.
Right, let's hear the Word of God as it's written in Revelation chapter 1.
The revelation from Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show His servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending His angel to His servant John, who testifies to everything He saw, that is, the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ.
Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it, and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.
[1:15] John, to the seven churches in the province of Asia, grace and peace to you from Him who is, who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before His throne, and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, the ruler of the kings of the earth.

To Him who loves us, and has freed us from our sins by His blood, and has made us to be a kingdom of priests to serve God, His God and Father. To Him be glory and power forever and ever. Amen. Look, He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see Him, and those who pierced Him, and all the peoples on the earth will mourn because of Him. So shall it be. Amen. I am the Alpha and the Omega, says the Lord, who is, who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.
I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. On the Lord's day I was on the Spirit, and heard behind me a loud voice, like a trumpet, which said, write on the scroll what you see, and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.
[2:34] I turned around to see the voice that was speaking, and when I turned, I saw seven golden lampstands, and among the lampstands was someone like a son of man, dressed in a robe, reaching to his feet, and with a golden sash around his chest, the hair of his head was white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire, his feet were like bronze, glowing in a furnace, and his face was like the sound of rushing waters.

In his right hand he held seven stars, and coming out of his mouth was a sharp double-edged sword, and his face was like the sun, shining in all its brilliance. When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead, and he placed his right hand on me and said, do not be afraid.
I am the first, and I am the last. I am the living one. I was dead, but look now. I am alive forever and ever, and I hold the keys of death and Hades.
This is the word of God. Let's pray. Oh Lord, we pray this morning that you might make us attentive, that you might help us to consider what we started on Friday, that is the death, and this morning the resurrection of our Lord Jesus.
Won't you turn our minds now, our hearts, and instill the distractions. Lord, won't you show us him in all his glory, like we read in Revelation 1 in all his might.
[4:27] One who holds the earth in his hands, and yet puts his hand on the shoulder of his apostle, and says, do not be afraid. We ask these things in Jesus' name.

Amen. One of my favorite authors, who you're getting to know from where I preach, Marilyn Robinson, has written a series of books about a small town in America in the late 1800s and the early 1900s, a town called Gilead.

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And the third book in the series is a book about a young drifter by the name of Lila. And one day Lila is seeking shelter, it's raining, she's passing through the town of Gilead, and the only place that's open, being so long ago, and it being a Sunday, is a church.
And so she kind of sneaks into the back of a church, and finds herself in the middle of a worship service, a Sunday gathering, much like ours today. And she looks around, and is suddenly struck by the strangeness of what she sees.
And we read this, Robinson writes, that Lila was thinking, how odd it was for these people to be here, singing songs to somebody who lived and died, like anybody else.
[5:59] Lila's bemusement or confusion isn't uncommon. Perhaps you brought it with you here this morning. I mean, it is odd, but a little strange, that this community this morning, and others like it around our city, around the world, and throughout history, have put considerable energy and effort into praising, in the words of Robinson again, somebody who lived, sure, but also died, like anybody else.

And so, my question to you this morning is, how do we account for it? How do we explain 2,000 years of hymns, songs, praise, and worship? This man, who, sure, was perhaps a little bit different, but in the end, simply died, like everyone else.
And I have three short answers, this morning, to explain, I think, to answer, or to attempt to begin to answer, why we're still singing, 2,000 years later.
And the first one, because it's always great to start, on a positive note, is, the first one is death. Okay? The first reason we're still singing, songs, to Jesus, is, because, of death.
You might call, the human life, one that is, haunted, a haunted existence. Because no matter how much we do, how much we accomplish, how far we go, in the end, we will all die.
[7:40] Now, I have a seven-year-old son, and I couldn't use him in my illustrations on Friday, because he was sitting in the service, but I see he's gone now, so I can. And my son is, like most children, he's very vocal about the things that he's afraid of.

He often tells us, what frightens him, what terrifies him, and seeks reassurance from us, in those things. And the thing that, that he brings up most often, is snakes, in our garden.
And we've never seen a snake, in our garden, ever. And yet, that is, amongst his fears, one of, the most prominent. That is interesting, and I've thought back, and reflected on it, as much as he speaks, about the things, that he's afraid of, and dying, or death, is almost never, amongst them. On occasion, he has asked, maybe because he perceives, that we're a little bit older, when I will die, or, when, when his mom will die, but not often, about his own.
At least, he is not afraid, of it. But I think, the older, you get, the more real, death becomes. The more palpable, the fear is.
[8:58] The more, the imposing, and inevitable reality, looms, over, our life. We push it away, we plan for retirement, we pursue longevity, we do the things, that the influencers, tell us to do, to be healthy, and to live long, and to be fulfilled.

But in the end, all we really do, is kick the can, further down, the road. And if you've ever sat up, at night, or, simply been overwhelmed, by the dread, of that thought, at the prospect, of death, then you're not alone, you're merely, human.
Consider these words, penned, by Leo Tolstoy, in the 1800s, in his autobiography, he asked this, something, that I think, most of us, at some point, or other, will wonder.
He writes, is there any meaning, in my life, that the inevitable death, awaiting me, does not destroy? Is there any meaning, in my life, that the inevitable death, awaiting me, does not destroy?
Now, at that point, of writing, Tolstoy, was well on his way, to becoming, one of the most, successful, accomplished, and widely read, and influential authors, of all time.
[10:16] He was wealthy, he lived in a castle, he had married a countess, everyone adored him, in Russia, and yet, he was a painfully aware, terrified even, that death, would bring, all of that, to an end.

That sense, of dread, and inevitability, like I said, is not, original to Tolstoy, it is, the human, experience. In fact, the apostle Paul, writes something similar, in his letter, to the Corinthians, a word, some of us will know, and we often use, in our Sunday liturgy, is that, if the dead are not raised, well then, let us eat, and drink, for tomorrow, we die.
And that expression, sounds silly, probably because it's been, parodied so often, but in reality, it's really popular, and prevalent, outlook, on life, today. Let's eat, and drink, for tomorrow, we die.

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We, indifferently, shrug our shoulders, we throw ourselves, into the various distractions, that life provides us, all to keep us, from seeing, what we know, to be true.
Few people, in my, my reading, on the topic, put their finger, better on this, than the French philosopher, Blaise Pascal. Sorry, this is the last, kind of intellectual quote, for you guys this morning.
[11:34] But Blaise Pascal, in his pensies, he writes this, he says, because we are unable, to cure death, we have decided, that if we are to be happy, it's better, if we just don't think, about such things.

Being unable, to cure death, we have decided, that to be happy, let's rather just, forget about it. And so he says, a little bit later, in the same work, in his pensies, he says, we are running, heedlessly, into the abyss.
And in order to do that, we need to, put something, in front of us, to stop us, from seeing it. This is how we live. Running, headlong, into that abyss, that Pascal talks about, we put things up, to prevent us, from seeing it.
Though we all know, that it is there. Death is, in the words, of the Apostle Paul, to come back to 1 Corinthians, it is the great, enemy. That none of us, will, overcome.
At least, human history, suggests, so. And so, Paul writes this, in 1 Corinthians 15, in verse 14, if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is useless.
[12:46] And so, is your faith. Then a few verses later, he repeats himself. He says, if Christ hasn't been raised, then your faith, is futile. And you will still die, in your sins.

The first reason, I think people are still singing, about Jesus, 2,000 years, on, is because, within just a few years, of Jesus' death, the Apostle Paul, could hang, his entire ministry, the whole Christian gospel, the existence, of the church, all of it.
He could hang, all of that, on the resurrection. And he could say, to everyone, look, if it didn't happen, you should go home. Because, if Jesus has not been raised, then we will not be either.
Paul isn't bluffing, nor is he walking, at this point. He was convinced, that because of Jesus' resurrection, he'll say later, in 1 Corinthians 15, because of his resurrection, death has been swallowed up, in his victory.
The great enemy, has met its match, and lost. Meaning that, those who trust, in this Lord, can participate, in that same victory, and in that same story.
[13:58] To come back to Tolstoy's question, there was someone, who death, couldn't destroy. A man, and a Lord, our God, who went, to the very end, and came back, victorious, to take people, with him.

And friends, if it were true, if it is true, wouldn't you want to worship, that Lord? Wouldn't you want to, give your life, to him?
Because finally, life has meaning, that death, cannot snuff out. Death, no longer cancels, out what we've done, nor who we've become.
If it's true, it's certainly, a reason, to sing. But maybe, you aren't convinced, and lots of people, still aren't.
And that brings us, to the second reason, I think people are still, praising Jesus. And that is, and it's going to sound, a little bit biased up front, but that's because, it definitely happened. Okay? It definitely happened.
[15:06] And I think that, because every other, explanation, for the church, fails, to do justice to it.
Let me explain to you. Now, I don't have time, to get into a full, apologetic for the resurrection, smarter people, than me, have done that.

N.T. writes, Resurrection of the Son of God, it's a great book. Tim Keller's, preached some great sermons, on the resurrection as well. But I want you to think, about the resurrection, with me for a second.
And the logic, of history. Okay? The resurrection, and the logic, of history. See, Jesus' death, at the time, would have been, a cruel, and crushing blow, for his disciples.
They had followed him, for three years, now all the way up, to Jerusalem. And if we did, Palm Sunday service, they laid the palms down, and they worshipped him, the king, returning to Zion, on that, in that week.
And a week later, he's dead. And Jesus doesn't die, quietly, off center, off stage, you know, in obscurity. But he was crucified.

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[16:13] Something that, one historian says, crucifixion was designed, to inflict as much pain, as possible, for as long as possible, in a manner that brought about, the complete, public humiliation, of its victim.

This was Rome's way, of exposing, the foolishness, of anyone, with any kind of, political pretensions. There was no heroism, or honor, in such a death.
The complete, public humiliation, of the victim, is what happens, to Jesus. Historically speaking, he was just, then, another upstart, squashed, under the boot, or the sandal, of Rome.
That was a joke. Should have left it out. Historically speaking, Jesus, would have been like, anyone else, at this time.
Executed, by the power, that was Rome. For having, any kind of idea, that they could oppose, or overturn, that same power. In this way, Jesus isn't even unique.
[17:25] If you read history, you would see that his pattern, of coming into Jerusalem, and then being executed, by Rome, was a pretty well established, pattern by the time. Messiahs would come, before Jesus, Messiahs would come, after Jesus, and all of them, suffer the very same thing.

Signaling, failure, to any, who would dare, follow him. And also, throwing a warning, a shot across the bow, to say that those, who follow this man, will end up, on the same cross.
Jesus' death, was in this way, quite ordinary. Painfully so, for the disciples, and probably, even a little predictable. It's a similar death, to countless other, lesser known stories, from the time, and the period.
Strangely though, strangely, this one, is remembered. Why? Well, there's, perhaps two answers, if we can, be reductive.
One popular argument, goes along these lines. And maybe, you've heard this one. Maybe you think, this was a, see after his death, the Jesus project, was in tatters. Okay, it's ruined. Okay, it's all, it's all, it's all come apart.
[18:36] Jesus' disciples, sitting around, you know, profoundly, despondent, discouraged, beaten, depressed. They're sitting around, they've been brought low, it's all failed.

Jesus was dead, and everyone saw it happen. Everyone saw it happen. In fact, in the moments leading up to his death, the disciples might remember, that they were climbing over each other, to get away from him.
Okay? In the garden, someone flees, naked, too afraid to come back, even to get his clothes. Peter denies Jesus three times, finally saying to him, I never even knew this man.
These are the disciples, that we are working with. Okay, this is the, these are the guys, that we've got after Jesus' death. Okay? But some people would suggest, that quite incredibly, these same men, sat around, and said, you know what we should do?
We should say, that Jesus came back. He's dead, he's buried, just a few days ago, and so these men, decided, that they would go around, the same empire, that has killed Jesus, saying, oh he didn't, remain, in the grave.
[19:53] What, would move people, like the disciples, who we know from history, to do that? Really? To sit around, I mean you can imagine, them looking at each other, and then someone's like, hey why don't we say, he's not still dead.

You can imagine others going, no one's saying, that's a great idea Peter, that's a great idea, because it's a terrible one.
Jesus is dead, and if he is still dead, at this point, that's going to happen to them, if they follow after him as well. The disciples have nothing, to gain, from proclaiming the resurrection, if it didn't happen.
And in fact, history tells us, that by proclaiming that resurrection, and going about preaching Jesus, they likewise, suffered similar fates to him. And so, what would move people, to do that?
Logically, I think, a resurrection. As the former, Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams writes, he says, Jesus appeared to people, whose confidence in him, was shocked.
[21:00] The bishop didn't put it like that. He said, Jesus appeared to people, whose confidence in him, had crumbled. Jesus didn't appear to believers. And therefore, it was the resurrection, that created the church, and not the church, that created the resurrection.

It's a wonderful turn of phrase, and all the more, because it makes the point, so well. There were no believers, after Jesus' death. They all saw what happened, in Jerusalem.

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They had packed it in, they were on their way home. That's why in Luke 24, we meet two disciples, leaving Jerusalem, downcast, defeated. And they're saying, do you not hear, did you not hear what happened?
It's over. We can leave. Those aren't the kind of people, who suddenly pivot, and start preaching, about a resurrection.
Rather, the resurrection, is the kind of event, that creates those sorts, of people. To read that Williams quote, again, it was the resurrection, that created the church, and their faith.
[22:10] Not the church, that created the resurrection. Friends, people are still singing, today, 2000 years later, for the same reason, that they did, in that first generation. resurrection. Because, it happened.

And link back, with our first point, because meeting, the resurrected Jesus, these men, and women, knew that death, would not have, the final word, for them.
Just like it didn't have, the final word, for their Lord. And if you, allow me to step out of, kind of, making the case, the apologetic, there is a point of application, here for the church.
For those of us today, who do call ourselves, believers. See, just like it did, then if the resurrection, did really happen, well then surely, it should change everything.
If it happened, if we believe, profess it to be so, then surely our lives, cannot be untouched, by that event. It surely wasn't, for those original witnesses, that we inhabit, the same story, as them.
[23:14] We worship the same Lord, as Paul will write, in Ephesians. We follow after, the same shepherd, of our souls. The resurrection, is an incredible event, which is why, so many people, refuse to believe it, today.

But in the various lives, of Jesus' disciples, recorded both, in the New Testament, and in history subsequent, we see, that throughout history, the truth, of the resurrection, has radically changed, and transforms, people's lives, as they follow, after him.
And this should be, the same, for a church today, that still professes, that resurrection. Our lives, cannot remain unchanged, if the resurrection, is true.
And this brings us, to one last, and don't worry, one more, shorter point. One more explanation, for why people, are still singing, today. Well we could sing, this morning.
And it's this, that in Jesus, we don't merely, meet someone, who defeats death, showing himself, to be alive, but we meet, someone, who it is a joy, to know.
[24:28] So the third, and final reason, is that the people, who meet the post-resurrection, Jesus, are overwhelmed, by him. The New Testament, is full of these meetings.

I've already mentioned, the two disciples, on the road, to Emmaus, as Jesus leaves them, they say to each other, were not our hearts, burning within us, while he talked, and opened up the scriptures, to us.
Because Jesus had explained, to them using the Old Testament, how the Messiah, had suffered and died, for his people. Were not our hearts, burning within us, they said. Or secondly, consider Peter, who I've already mentioned, denies Jesus three times, leading up to the crucifixion.
And yet in John 21, we see this failed, and imperfect follower, treated with grace, and love, by the risen Lord Jesus. Peter doesn't have to prove, himself.
He's already shown, that he falls short, of Jesus. That he is in many ways, undeserving, and yet when he meets, the resurrected Jesus, he is not chided, but rather comforted, and commissioned, to preach the gospel.
[25:44] What about the apostle Paul, on his way to Damascus? Having just left, Jerusalem, and having had, a follower of Jesus, stoned, hell bent on destroying, the church, Paul is going about, through the area, and his encounter, encounters the resurrected Jesus.

Jesus. And Jesus doesn't only, confront him, he commissions him. This man, devoted to harming, God's people, as Ananias puts it, is in Jesus words, his chosen instrument.
Again, not because he earns it, not because he deserves it, not because he's a great, or eloquent preacher, but simply because, the Lord Jesus, the resurrected Lord Jesus, is gracious.
In each one of those, and many others, people who encounter, the resurrected Jesus, meet a loving Lord. No simple, or mere conqueror, and victor, but a Lord who loves.
We saw on Friday, a Lord who serves, who gives himself up, for his people. And so that, when he meets people, after his resurrection, he can say to Peter, it's alright, to Paul, you're my instrument.

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[27:00] But I want us to finish, with that passage, that I read, at the start. So if you still have, Bible, Revelation chapter 1, a fourth encounter. And again, the last reason, in answer to Lila's question, why people are still singing today?

Why are people still singing, two millennia? It's because in Christ, they've met someone, who doesn't only defeat, the great enemy. someone who rose triumphantly, from the grave, all of which is true, but more than that, they meet someone, who loves, and forgives, and who shows grace, and compassion, to imperfect people.
They meet someone, who has made a way, for us to come to God. This is the point, of the book of Hebrews. They meet someone, that to know, and to be used by him, is a great delight, and joy.
Look at Revelation 1, and verse 4. John writes, grace and peace to you, from him who is, who was, and who is to come. And from the spirits, before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, the ruler of the kings, of the earth.
It's a traditional greeting, in many ways. You'll sign a few emails, like that, don't you? And one you might be familiar with, sorry. It's what we read, at the start of, the book of Ephesians, or 1 Peter, for example.
[28:27] But John goes on, to say that Jesus, isn't only the firstborn, from the dead. But look how he continues, in verse 5. See, after introducing himself, and his letter, John writes this, to him, to him who loves us, and has freed us, from our sins, by his blood, and made us, a kingdom of priests, to serve his God, and Father, to him, be glory, and power, forever, and ever.

Amen. John continues, he recounts this, post-resurrection meeting, if we could call it that, and seeing Jesus, in his glory, and his might, his power, and authority, verse 17, John says, that when I saw him, I fell at his feet, as though dead, he is overwhelmed, as he meets, the Lord Jesus, but keep reading, because Jesus, verse 17, placed his right hand, on me, and he said, do not be afraid, I am the first, and I am the last, I am the living one, I was dead, and now look, I am alive, forever, and ever, and I hold the keys, of death, and Hades, as John meets, the resurrected Lord, the ascended Christ, as he is overwhelmed, by his might, and power, you read that description, Jesus terrified, the resurrected, and ascended Lord, and yet John is comforted, with a hand, a gentle Lord, who says to him, do not be afraid, do not be anxious, do not be filled, with dread, or fear, why?
Well the answer comes, earlier in the passage, because the one who was dead, is alive forever, and ever, and he holds the keys, but more than that, up and back again, in verse 5, this one who holds the keys, who conquered it, who reigns over the earth, is the same one who, verse 5, loves us, and has freed us, from our sins, by his blood, the one, and the same Lord, when the disciples, meet him after, his resurrection, he still bears the marks, of the cross, the marks, of his suffering, for them, and so, when John meets him here, even though he is already, installed, and ruling, mightily, thundering from heaven, he is still able, to comfort, his people, by what he has done, for them, and I think that's, probably the best reason, to still be singing, 2000 years, later, because in Jesus, we meet a Lord, who loves us, and has freed us, by giving himself, for us, let's pray,
Lord, we thank you, for this, Easter Sunday, this opportunity, to reflect, to meditate, and Lord, we pray, more than, to be moved, to be convicted, and amongst that Lord, still, to be comforted, by your great, love, and our great, resurrected Lord, help us to, set our hearts, and minds, and affections, on him, this morning, today, this week, might his resurrection, give, direction, as it gives purpose, to life, and may we delight, in him, the one who still, bears the marks, of his suffering, for us, show us the Lord Jesus, we pray, and in his name, we pray,
[32:49] Amen.

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