

## **'IMPOSSIBLE NOT TO RISE'**

### **ACTS 2:22-41**

**[Easter Day Online Service – April 12, 2020- 9:30am & 5pm]**

#### **1. You'll Never Believe What Happened . . .**

The date was January 3, 2003. It was one of the most memorable afternoons of my life. I was at the Sydney Cricket Ground for an Ashes test match. England had batted first and scored a respectable 362. And just before tea on the second day Australia had stumbled to 3 for 56 when Steve Waugh came to the crease. Waugh was the Australian captain and his team weren't in a great position. Even more to the point his personal contribution in the test matches leading up to this one had been pretty poor by his standards. He was probably under pressure to keep his place in the side. People had begun to speculate that this test match could be Steve Waugh's last.

To his great credit he found some form that day and he'd only faced 61 balls when he brought up his 50. A little while later he got his personal score to 69 and in so doing brought up his 10,000<sup>th</sup> run in test cricket- a staggering achievement. By the time the last over the day came he had raced to 95. He didn't score any runs off the first three balls and then he scored three off the 4<sup>th</sup> ball bringing his score to 98 and his batting partner Adam Gilchrist onto strike. Gilchrist dutifully scored a single bringing Waugh back to the strikers end to face the last ball of the day. By this time all 40,000 people at the ground were on their feet. The sense of expectation was enormous. After an epic day we wanted the fairytale finish. Seeing someone score a test century is always exciting. But the context of this particular day made the prospect of a Steve Waugh century from the last ball of the day too tantalising for words.

The final ball was bowled and Steve Waugh rocked gently on to the back foot and creamed the ball through the covers. The crowd absolutely erupted. {SLIDE} Including me. In terms of sheer sporting theatre I had never seen anything like it before and I don't think I've ever seen anything like it since. At least not live. To say it was exhilarating would be an understatement. And that night I went home to Tamara and said: "you'll never believe what happened". And I told the story- probably much as I told it to you now except with the glow of the sun, the sun cream, and Steve Waugh's glory still on my face. {CLOSE SLIDE} And in the days that followed I told everyone who would listen. Of course by that time there was no point saying "you'll never believe what happened" because every living person in Sydney had heard about it. But instead I would tell people "I was there. I saw it with my own eyes. It was amazing." And I love telling the story to this day. Maybe you can tell.

#### **2. The Story Peter Told (Acts 2:22-24).**

And we're dealing with something similar here in Acts 2. What we just read is a record of what the apostle Peter said on the day of Pentecost. Jesus had by this time ascended to heaven. And the Holy Spirit had fallen on Jesus' disciples as they were gathered together in Jerusalem, enabling them to speak in various languages. And as a result a great crowd gathered- which was, for Peter, a perfect opportunity for a sermon. Now I don't know what you think of when you hear the word "sermon", but on this occasion the sermon was much less like a droning oration from a dusty old clergyman, and much more like my conversation with Tamara when I got home from the SCG on January 3, 2003. You'll never believe what happened?! I saw it with my own eyes. Peter's sermon was the excited testimony of someone who was an eye-witness to the most astounding and thrilling things. These were the words of someone who had a story they couldn't wait to tell!

And it's wonderfully summarised in verses 22-24 which is the paragraph at the start of the passage we read today/tonight. Peter's story had three key points. Let me just remind you of them very briefly.

### **- a life accredited by God**

Firstly, Jesus lived a life accredited by God. Verse 22. {SLIDE}

[Read 2:22]

Here Peter talks about the amazing life of Jesus. He loved everyone he met. He spoke with a rare authority. He healed the sick, forgave the sinners, fed the hungry, calmed the storms. His life was full of miracles and wonders and these were signs, says Peter- signs of who Jesus really was. Signs of where Jesus had come from. These were God's way of "accrediting" Jesus. {CLOSE SLIDE} Every miracle he performed was another stamp on Jesus' life saying that he was the real deal, assuring people that he really did come from God. And Peter had seen these miracles with his own eyes<sup>1</sup>. As had many in his audience that day.

### **- a death planned by God**

But Peter's second point is that Jesus died a death planned by God. Verse 23. {SLIDE}

[Read 2:23]

Again we're reminded that the people listening to Peter's story that day were people intimately involved in it. In fact, he says, they were responsible for Jesus' death on the cross. But not only them. Because Peter reminds them that Jesus' death occurred

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<sup>1</sup> See the theme of 'witness' traced through to verse 32 as well.

according to the deliberate plan and foreknowledge of God. {CLOSE SLIDE} As we were reminded on Friday, given the plan of God it was impossible for Jesus not to die!

**- a resurrection accomplished by God**

But that brings us to the third point in Peter's story. That Jesus experienced a resurrection accomplished by God. Verse 24. {SLIDE}

[Read 2:24]

God did this. He raised Jesus from the dead that first Easter. He freed him from death's agony. And those who saw him after he came back to life, those like Peter, went around telling anyone who would listen: 'You'll never believe what happened'. 'I saw him with my own eyes'.

**3. A Story That Couldn't Possibly Have Finished Another Way (Acts 2:24).**

But today/tonight I want to hone in on one particular phrase in that verse. It's a phrase that's always fascinated me. The last line of verse 24: 'because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him'. That's an incredible thing for Peter to say isn't it? He could have said that Jesus' resurrection was unsurprising. He perhaps could've said it was predictable. Maybe he could have described it as amazing. But Peter chooses his words very carefully here and he says something that I, for one, find very striking. He says that it was actually impossible for the resurrection not to happen. {CLOSE SLIDE} We heard on Good Friday why it was impossible for Jesus not to die. Now we hear that it was impossible for Jesus not to rise. Peter's stunning claim is that his story about Jesus couldn't possibly have finished another way. What do you think he means by that? Well I've been pondering that in the lead up to this Easter and I want to suggest to you three reasons for this remarkable claim.

**- because of what God promised**

Number 1- because of what God promised. That is, it was impossible for Jesus not to rise because for hundreds of years God had been saying that the Messiah would die and rise again. In his sermon on Friday Pat read from Isaiah 53 which prophesies the death of God's servant- that he would be pierced for the transgressions of others, and that his wounds would bring healing. And a little bit later in that chapter the prophet Isaiah says this: 'After he has suffered he will see the light of life and be satisfied.'<sup>2</sup> And in Acts 2 Peter himself refers back to several other Old Testament passages which say something similar<sup>3</sup>. In particular he quotes from Psalm 16 which we read just a few

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<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 53:11

<sup>3</sup> 2 Samuel 7 and Psalm 110. And given the words of Jesus (Matthew 12:40), we should also consider the rescue of Jonah from the belly of the great fish as a kind of enacted prophecy of Christ's resurrection.

moments ago- where King David speaks of not being abandoned to the realm of the dead but being shown the path of life. And as Peter points out here, King David died and was buried and his tomb was still in Jerusalem as he was saying these things. So David can't have been speaking about himself but about another King- one who would come after him- God's Messiah. God had foretold the resurrection of the Christ. He'd promised it. And that's one of the reasons why it had to happen; one of the reasons why it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him. Because God always keeps his promises.

### **- because of what God sought to accomplish**

But also, number 2- because of what God sought to accomplish. As we saw in verse 23, Jesus died according to the plan of God. But that plan was for his resurrection as well. And the reason for the plan is the great good that God wanted to do for humankind. As Peter will go on to say, God's purpose was that men and women and boys and girls might be forgiven of their sins, that they might receive the gift of God's Spirit, and that they might be brought near to God<sup>4</sup>. And none of these things would've been possible if God's King stayed dead. None of these things would be possible without there being a living Saviour. So the resurrection of Jesus is just as essential as his death.

Jesus died and rose because God loves the world. Jesus died and rose because human sin- which we all share in- had to be dealt with. Jesus died and rose because God wanted to draw people who were far from him back towards him. That's the absolute heart of the Easter story. And it was the heart of Peter's story on the day of Pentecost. He didn't just want people to know that Jesus lived, died, and rose. He wanted them to know why. Death could not keep its hold on Jesus because God was seeking to accomplish something. And God always does what he sets out to do.

### **- because of who Jesus is**

But number 3- because of who Jesus is. You see he's not like King David, and he's not like all the other people whose bodies have been laid to rest. Given who Jesus is he could never have stayed in a tomb. Because he's God's Messiah. He's God himself. He's the one who made the world and everything in it. He's the source of all life. Of course death could not keep its hold on him. Frankly, death just isn't powerful enough. We think of death as being very powerful. It feels like that at the moment doesn't it. We're in fear of it. For very good reasons. Death is the great enemy. And try as we might when our time comes we have no power to resist it. But not so with Jesus. Death is a weakling compared to him- a puny and laughable opponent.

The walls of Jesus' tomb are like some sand-bags on the shore front trying to hold back an approaching tsunami. Death to Jesus is like a piece of string attempting to restrain a

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<sup>4</sup> See verses 38-39.

silverback gorilla. Death can no more hold Jesus in the tomb than a pregnant woman can hold her child in when the moment for birth comes<sup>5</sup>. Because the creator can't be confined by the creation. The author of life can never, ever, ever be conquered by death. Death could not keep its hold on Jesus because of who it was that death was trying to hold. It was never going to work. Because of who Jesus is. "Is" being the operative word. Because he's alive even now. And he's alive this very day because the Easter story couldn't possibly have finished another way.

#### 4. Will You Believe What Happened?

You can understand, can't you, why Peter was so excited to share his story. You'll never believe what happened, he would say. Jesus was raised from the dead. And I saw him with my own eyes.

But of course people do believe it. They believe it because there were eye-witnesses to the resurrected Jesus, eyewitness who told their story and had it written down. And they believe it because it makes sense. It makes sense because God promised it would happen and he always keeps his promises. It makes sense because God had a plan to save people from their sins and to bring people who were distant back to him- and God always does what he sets out to do. And it makes sense because it's ridiculous to even think that death could claim God- it's ridiculous to think that death could keep its hold on the one who gave life to everything and everyone in the world.

And the question for us today is obvious. Do we believe it? Do you? Will you believe what happened that first Easter? Not everyone who heard Peter share his story that day believed. But many did. We heard what he said when he got to the end of his sermon. Verse 38. {SLIDE}

[Read 2:38-39]

Many there that day accepted his message. And today, as we hear it again, do you? {CLOSE SLIDE}

If you will believe it, it will completely change your life. And many watching this today/tonight can testify that that is indeed their experience- like James who we heard from a few minutes ago. We were once far away from God but now we've been brought near. The resurrected Jesus has forgiven our sins. He has sent us his Holy Spirit. So every day we know deep joy- even in dark times like the days we're living in. And every day we are becoming more and more like Jesus himself. And this is why Easter is so precious to us. Because this story has become our story. It was impossible for death to keep its hold on him. He lives. And we know him. And he walks with us and shapes our lives- every single day, no matter what the world throws at us.

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<sup>5</sup> This last image comes from G. Bertram in F.F. Bruce's commentary- p.64.

And even if that's not yet your experience, it's not too late. Because you heard Peter's invitation, and it still stands. The promise of sins forgiven and a new life with the living Jesus- it's a promise for all who are far off- for you, for your children, for all the Lord our God will call. And today he calls you. Are you listening? The risen Jesus is speaking to you. Will you come to him? If that's the desire of your heart this morning/evening but you're not quite sure where to start, please get in touch with us. We'd like nothing more than to help you.

The resurrection of Jesus is the absolute bed-rock of the Christian faith. Many in our world today are deeply sceptical of it. But today/tonight I say to you- how could you not believe it? Because it was not possible for the Easter story to finish any other way. 'God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible'- impossible- 'for death to keep its hold on him'. Amen.