

**April 4, 2021**  
**Being Easter People in 2021**  
**Matthew 28:1-7**

Whether you've been around Christianity for years or are new to faith, you probably know the Easter story. It goes something like this: humans are sinners, doomed to die; Jesus dies as a sacrifice, paying for our sins, so we might be forgiven; and then Jesus comes to life again – the result is that we, His followers can go to heaven when we die.

That's great! But is that really what it's ALL about? The basic facts are true. All of us have fallen short of God's perfect standard. The consequences of sin are death. Jesus did die on the cross. We can be forgiven. On the third day, Jesus does rise from the dead. One day, some day, we will be with Him, forever.

But what about now? What about today – April 4, 2021? What does Easter mean to a world going through Covid? For people who are lonely, struggling with their mental health? For people who are ill, wrestling their physical health? For people who are unemployed, whose finances have fallen apart? For people desperate for connection with other people? For people needing meaningful daily activity? Does Easter have anything at all to say to us, today? Or is it only a hope for life after death?

***"I've read the last page of the Bible ..."***

Billy Graham once said, *"I've read the last page of the Bible, it's all going to turn out all right."* Have you read the last page of the Bible? You may be surprised. The last great scene in the Bible is not about saved souls going up to heaven, as most of us might assume. The last pages of the Bible are about a new Jerusalem ***coming down from heaven to earth*** so heaven and earth are joined together. It's about Jesus coming here and setting everything right. It's all very different than we've been led to believe.

As we have looked at some of Jesus' parables over the past few months (and read through Mark in the daily readings), if we've been listening to what Jesus is saying, we see He is constantly talking about the coming of God's Kingdom (in Mark 15 times, in Matthew and Luke, 32 times each).<sup>1</sup> Over and over again Jesus says, *"The Kingdom of God is at hand/has come near/has arrived"* or *"The Kingdom of God is like ..."*

When we look at the crucifixion narratives in all four Gospels, they're about Jesus being enthroned as king. He is given a robe, crown, and sceptre (Matthew 27:27-30). He is lifted high up above the crowds. He is named "the King of the Jews" (Matthew 27:57). Of course, Jesus is enthroned as a VERY different kind of king than anyone had ever seen before. Or anyone would expect. However, Easter asks us to look at what

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Matthew, Mark, Luke and John all highlight that when Jesus is crucified something amazing happens. Jesus exercises such amazing power that the dark forces that nailed Him to the cross – the evil powers that have locked the world in corruption, decay, and death are overthrown. Through His rule as king-on-the-cross, Jesus takes control. From now on, Jesus is the One running the show – even though it may not look like it.

The message of the New Testament is the cross of Jesus is the means by which God's Kingdom is actually launched on earth as in heaven – because through the cross, those other powers are defeated. A new world, the Kingdom of God, is coming into being.

There's a background to this. The ancient Jewish hope, rooted in the Psalms, Isaiah, and Daniel was that one day God Himself would come back and overthrow the evil powers that have been running the world. The prophets describe this as a great revolution. In a revolution, people who feel their lives being squashed and crushed by foreign rulers throw off their oppressors. Tyrants are overthrown. They are set free.

The expectation was a mighty military leader to slaughter their enemies, reboot the economy, build walls, drive out foreigners, and purify the nation. They expected this would happen only for the geographical/political/cultural nation of Israel. No one else.

The cross shows us that we are completely wrong about what power is, freedom is, the Kingdom of God is, and what life is really all about. Power is not military might. Power is love. We don't need to drive people out. We need to drive out the evil in our own souls. We don't need political freedom. We need freedom from the power of sin. We need a Saviour for ALL people, from ALL nations. We don't need some great national hero. We need a Saviour of the world. We need God Himself, come among us.

This is precisely what happened when Jesus died on the cross. He took on the powers of evil, sin, and death. He took them on Himself. If Jesus of Nazareth had stayed dead, then nobody would have given a second thought to His crucifixion. There were lots and lots of failed revolutionaries in Jesus' day, often ending up on Roman crosses. Jesus would have been just another one in a long line of failed Messiahs.

But, on Easter Sunday, Jesus – the King of Kings and Lord of Lords – rises from the dead. The powers of evil are once and for all – forever – broken and defeated. From this side of Easter, we can look back at His cross and say, *"He IS risen! He has defeated the power of sin. The reign of evil has been overthrown. Death has been destroyed."* He is all-powerful. He is sovereign over everything. And now, the Bible tells, He does reign at the right hand of the Father. And now, the Bible also says, He is with us always, through the constant presence of His Holy Spirit. And now, the Bible further says, that one day He will return to finally set all things right. This is what that image of the New Jerusalem on the last page of the Bible is all about.

## ***What does Easter mean for us today?***

The Gospels – especially the parables we’ve looked at – frame Easter in terms of the dawn of the Kingdom of God. Reread Matthew, Mark, Luke and John: Jesus is always talking about the Kingdom of God. *The kingdom of God is here ... The Kingdom of God is like ...* Jesus shows God’s Kingdom has come as He plows over the powers of evil and death – the schemes of the devil are revealed for the evil they are; demons flee before Him; social and ethnic barriers are destroyed; illness, suffering, and death are ended.

On the cross, Jesus goes into the deepest darkness of all, to take the full weight of evil upon Himself. This is a deep mystery, and I suspect we’ll never fully understand it. But the Gospels make it clear that He goes into the darkness as our representative and, therefore, as our substitute. And, as He rise to life, He destroys its power, forever. Easter – the resurrection, tells us a revolution has taken place. Things are not as they were before. Our oppression by evil is done. The tyrant is overthrown. We are free.

So what does this mean for us who are lonely, struggling with our mental health, who are ill, wrestling with our physical health, who are unemployed, whose finances have fallen apart, who’ve lost loved ones, who are desperate for connection with others?

***Easter tells us we live with the King - now.*** Through faith in Jesus, we are “born again” to new life. We are set free from sin and death. We are forgiven by Jesus. We can get to know, talk with, and journey with God, personally, as His Spirit fills us. He is with us always. Ultimately, we do have confidence that when we physically die, we shall rise to be with Him forever. Those are all wonderful truths. But Easter also reminds us we are also beloved daughters and sons of God. We are a family – sisters and brothers united in community as His church. We care deeply for one another (I hope!).

- Our primary identity is as people whom God loves. God always treasures us.
- When we face challenges, we do not do so alone. He is with us – He is within us, through His Spirit. He guides us, encourages us, corrects us, comforts us, empowers us, teaches us, inspires us, and provides for us.
- And – very importantly - we are His family, a community, the church.

***Easter calls us to live as people of the King - now.*** We not only pray, “*Your Kingdom come and your will be done,*” we set about seeing that prayer come to pass. This is the ultimate in meaningful daily activity: we are God’s feet, arms, hands, and voice of love. This has been the legacy of God’s faithful people through the ages: they have changed the world in the name of the risen Jesus, inspired by the Spirit of the risen Jesus, through the power of the risen Jesus.

We, in the modern West, have been conned into believing that Christianity hasn’t really made any big changes in the world. In truth, many times, we Christians have gotten it wrong – crusades, inquisitions, witch-burnings, residential schools, and so on – but look

at the thousands of things we've gotten right because of the events of Easter:

- No civilian hospitals existed in the Roman Empire until early Christian bishops chose to build hospitals in every cathedral town. By the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, Christian hospitals were commonplace, providing safe hostels for travellers, dispensaries for poor relief, clinics and surgeries for the injured, and homes for the blind, lame, elderly, and mentally ill.
- The first schools in Europe (and Canada) were founded by churches.
- The first critiques of slavery were written by Christian leaders (in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century!) by Gregory of Nyssa and John Chrysostom. The abolitionist movement in Britain and the Americas was led by people like William Wilberforce, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Fredrick Douglass, motivated by Christian convictions.
- Think of social reformers, from Tommy Douglas to Martin Luther King Jr.
- The "Famous Five," influential in the women's suffrage movement in Canada, all had Christian roots and inspiration (Read [\*In Times Like These\*](#) by Nellie McClung).

What about us, today? Nellie McClung, (1873-1951), Canadian author, social activist, suffragette, and Alberta MLA, wrote, *"It was the people who did not like to be disturbed who crucified Christ - the worst fault they had to find with Him was that He annoyed them - He rebuked their sinful minds - and so they crucified Him - and went back to sleep. The sin of the world has ever been indifference and slothfulness, more than real active wickedness. Life, the real abundant life of one who has a vision of what a human soul may aspire to, is warfare - not one set of human beings warring upon other human beings - but war waged against ignorance, selfishness, darkness, prejudice and cruelty, beginning always with the roots of evil which we find in our own hearts."*

When we do see the evil in our hearts, we do confess, and repent (change direction) (I hope). Then, when we wage war against things like ignorance, selfishness, darkness, prejudice and cruelty, we are being Easter people. How can we do that?

Even during Covid, but we don't have to be indifferent, slothful, or asleep. C.S. Lewis says, next to Jesus Himself, your neighbour is the holiest object ever presented to your sight, because in him or her the living Christ is truly present (Matthew 25:31-46). When we love our neighbour, we do defeat ignorance, selfishness, prejudice, and cruelty.

We can encourage people. We can thank people. We can challenge evil and injustice. We can pray - for our church, for neighbours, for family, for strangers, and for those on the front lines, locally and globally (our mission field staff around the world: the Soucys, Huttons, Lisa Ratzlaff, and others). We can support the Food Bank, Soup Kitchen, Days for Girls, and sponsor refugees. We can be Easter people - and find meaning and purpose, even during Covid - by being the people of the risen Jesus.

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(403) 327-2082 [bruce@firstb.net](mailto:bruce@firstb.net)

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