

Streetsville United Church
Sunday, April 11, 2010
Rev. John Tapscott

"A CHANGE FOR THE BETTER"

Acts 5:27-32

On Easter Sunday we proclaim, "Christ is Risen, He is Risen indeed!" And in the beauty of Easter worship we have no doubt that Jesus is indeed Risen and alive! But after we leave, our confidence in the resurrection may fade a bit. We don't disbelieve, we just need to be reminded of the solid reasons for believing in Jesus' resurrection. After all, we don't see a resurrection every day.

A minister was burying a church member in a cemetery more than an hour away. He rode along with the funeral director in the hearse. On the way the minister began to feel ill. By the time they got to the cemetery he had a fever and a headache and felt nauseous. He got through the burial service and as they started home, the funeral director told him to stretch out in the back of the hearse. It was now empty and he could rest quietly back there. It had a curtain and no one would see him. So he laid down and fell asleep. After a while the hearse stopped and the minister awoke. He sat up slowly and pulled back the curtain. Suddenly he was face to face with an attendant pumping gas. The attendant was shocked to see a body in the back of a hearse rise up and stare back at him. Pale as a ghost and with eyes wide as saucers, the attendant ran back to the gas station, while the funeral director ran out to explain the whole situation.

The resurrection of Jesus was a unique historical event. That's why it's good to review it's historical underpinnings. Lee Strobel, author of the *Case for Christ* and the *Case for Faith* says, "I used to consider the Resurrection to be a laughable fairy tale. Yale Law School had trained me to be coldly rational, and my years of sniffing for news at the *Chicago Tribune* had only toughened my naturally cynical personality. But intrigued by changes in my wife after she became a Christian, I spent two years using my journalistic and legal experience to study the evidence for the Resurrection and the credibility of Jesus' claims to being the Son of God. I emerged totally convinced and gave my life to Christ..."

What are some of the convincing reasons for affirming that Christ really rose from the dead? For one thing, there is the fact that the tomb was found empty and the stone rolled away. If the disciples were making the story up, the opponents of Jesus simply could have gone to the tomb, opened it up and said, "Here's Jesus' body." Certainly if you were making the story up you wouldn't have had women as the first to arrive at the tomb and the first witnesses of the resurrection. Women were not even considered credible witnesses in court. And would you have been so honest about the disciples' initial confusion and scepticism? Then there is the fact that, besides the apostles, more than 500 witnesses all saw the risen Jesus together. Another factor was the change in

the lives of the disciples recorded in the New Testament. Many of them went to death because they would and could not deny the resurrection of their Lord. They had to speak of what they had seen.

Take the change that came in Peter. Peter wept bitterly over his three-fold denial of Jesus. But then Jesus was raised and the rest of the New Testament presents a changed Peter. We see an example in Acts 5 v. 12-32. After the resurrection, Jesus' followers, now empowered by the Holy Spirit, were running loose in Jerusalem doing all sorts of "signs and wonders". People were bringing the sick out into the streets so that Peter's shadow might fall upon them and make them well. Many people became Christian believers. The religious leaders had the apostles thrown into jail. But at night, an angel came and let them out of jail saying, "Go, stand in the temple and tell the people the whole message about this life." So the apostles went back to the temple and resumed teaching about Jesus. The high priest and his cronies went to the prison to get the apostles and were perplexed when they discovered the empty jail cell. Just then someone arrived and announced, "The men you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people!" They sent police to bring the apostles before the court. The high priest said, "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching." Peter said, "We must obey God rather than any human authority," and went on to tell them, "The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him as Leader and Saviour that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins, And we are witnesses to these things."

What made the difference in Peter? It was the resurrection of Christ. Through the resurrection God changed Peter from someone who fled at a servant girl's question to a fearless preacher of Christ. Through the resurrection God changed Peter for the better.

The resurrection changes us, too, we who believe in the Risen Christ. We are different people because Jesus Christ is Risen and Alive. Through the resurrection of Jesus Christ God changes us for the better.

Here's the first change. *Through the resurrection of Christ God changes us from people of despair to people who hold a living hope.*

Peter's letters are filled with expressions of hope. "We have been born anew to a living hope," he cries, "through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." "Always be ready," he says, "to give a reason for the hope that is in you." And the reason for Peter's unwavering hope was the resurrection of Christ. After his three-fold denial Peter figured it was all over. He thought that the Risen Christ would no longer want him as a follower. But Christ graciously came to him and restored him. And Peter fulfilled the potential Jesus saw in him back when he said, "I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock, I will build my church." Peter did become rock-like as we see in today's reading. The resurrection changed Peter from a man of despair into a man with living hope. He now knew that no one and no situation was beyond God's redeeming love and power.

It's the same for us. The resurrection turns us from those who despair into those who hold a living hope. There is a famous painting which shows an evil looking figure sitting at a table facing an old man on the other side. They are playing chess. The evil one looks smug because it appears that he has won the game. "Check-mate" is written all over his face. But if you are a chess player and you study the board carefully, you can see that the old man has one more move he can make to defeat his opponent and win the game.

On Good Friday the powers and principalities were gloating. They had killed God's Son and sealed him in a tomb forever. But God had one more move to make and that was to raise his Son from the grave. The resurrection means that God always has one more move to make. So we can never say, "That person is beyond hope," or "That situation cannot be redeemed." Now from a human perspective, there may be nothing more that can be done. But from God's perspective, there is always something more that can be done. The resurrection of Jesus Christ means that the story is not finished. It means that failure, sin, evil, and death do not have the final word. God will have the final word! Through the resurrection of Jesus, God changes us from people of despair into people who hold a living hope.

Secondly, the resurrection of Jesus brings us from death to life.

Now this does not just happen at our physical death when the Lord raises us up to eternal life. That's part of it and the culmination of our life in Christ. But according to the New Testament the transition from death to life occurs here and now as we come to faith in Jesus Christ, Crucified and Risen! Paul writes, "You were once dead in your sins and trespasses...but God who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us made us alive together with Christ..." Through the Risen One God has brought us from spiritual death to spiritual life. "One you were lost but now you are found...once you walked in darkness but now you walk in light...once you were dead but now you are alive." John tells us, "Whoever has the Son of God has life, whoever does not have the Son does not have life."

You can be very successful from a worldly point of view, living it up, so to speak, but the New Testament is clear - if you don't know God and Jesus Christ whom he has sent you are dead in soul. But when you come to know and trust Jesus Christ you move from death to life, here and now. And that is a very big change, indeed!

One more thing. Through the resurrection of Jesus Christ God changes us into from timid followers into courageous, obedient disciples.

In the high priest's courtyard Peter denied Jesus three times. But now Peter told the chief priest, "We must obey God rather than any human authority." He had now become a courageous, obedient disciple.

That's what happens when the reality of Jesus' resurrection gets hold of us. We are filled with courage to do what God wants us to do. Now there are times when human

authority is to be obeyed. I pay my taxes, try to keep within the speed limit and obey the laws of the land. These things do not conflict with God's laws. In such cases the Bible tells us to obey the authorities. But where God's commandments conflict with human commandments, we must obey God. And the strength to do so comes through the resurrection of Christ. The resurrection shows us that God and not any human power is on the throne. The resurrection confirms that God's ways are higher than human ways.

There was a man whose boss tried to get him to engage in some dishonest schemes. The boss threatened to fire him if he didn't go along. It was during a recession and jobs were scarce. The man was in turmoil. But finally he said, "No." For he realized that the boss' authority was limited. The worst he could do was fire him. He couldn't rob the man of his wife's love, or the joy he found in his children, or his own self-respect, or his integrity.

The resurrection of Christ means that human power is limited, but that God's power is not. Even death has limited authority. That's why the early Christians went to their death singing hymns. They knew that no power could separate them from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. They knew that death would bring them even closer to the Lord whose strength and presence they knew here on earth.

Through the resurrection of Jesus God changes us into faithful obedient servants who say "We must obey God rather than any human authority." Peter's words are some of the most powerful words ever. They are the secret to victorious living. When you say them all hell trembles. And do you know who said those words even before Peter - that's right - our Lord Jesus. Because he obeyed God rather than human authority we have been changed from people of despair into those who hold a living hope; changed from those we were dead into those who are alive, changed from timid followers into those who say, "We must obey God rather than any human authority." And with those words in our hearts and on our lips we help God to change the world.