

HEBS 13.20, 21: GLORY TO JESUS
Central Baptist Church, Chelmsford 8 April 2007

1. GLORY TO THE RISEN LORD

Have you ever imagined yourself playing poker with God?
In 1974, just before she died, an American poet called Anne Sexton wrote a poem just about that:

*“We squat on the rocks by the sea
And play – can it be true – a
Game of poker.
He calls me
I win because I hold a royal straight flush.
He wins because he holds five aces.*

*A wild card had been announced
But I had not heard it
Being in such a state of awe when he took out the cards and dealt
As he plunks down His five aces
And I sit grinning at my royal flush,
He starts to laugh,
The laughter rolling like a hoop out of his mouth
And into mind,
And such laughter that He doubles right over me”*

A strange poem – but entirely apposite for Easter Day.
For on Good Friday, the Devil thought he had won the game.
He had as it were put down his royal flush.
Jesus, was crucified, dead and buried.
Death, sin, darkness ruled the day.
But then, when everything seemed lost, when the very worst thing in the history of the world had just happened, God played his five aces
When his opponent had played his strongest hand, God trumped him.
And with the playing of that fifth ace, heaven and earth exploded in joy unbelievable.
For God had had the last laugh.

Yes, that is what we celebrate this Easter Day
In the words of my text for today found in Hebs 13.20: **“God has raised from death our Lord Jesus”**.

God has done it!
Yes, God is the great actor of Easter Day – it is his mighty act of resurrection that we celebrate today.
The message of Easter is not: “Jesus rose from the dead”, as though Jesus automatically popped up from the grave like a cork from the water.
There was nothing natural about the resurrection.
Rather, the message of Easter Day is **“God raised from death our Lord Jesus”**
It was God’s mighty act. It was God’s hands that took the stone which the builders rejected and made it the head of the corner. God did it.

I'm reminded of my grand-daughter, Jemima
Whenever I've done wrong, her comment always is: "*Grandpa did it*"
On one occasion, for instance, I forgot to blow out a candle on the table – five
minutes later she discovered the candle still burning, and declared accusingly:
"*Grandpa did it*". Grandpa you got it wrong.
But the resurrection was a moment in time when God got it right
God did it – "**God raised from death the Lord Jesus**".
This is the glorious news of Easter Day.

And news it is – in the sense that Easter Day is not about subjective perceptions, but
about objective truth. It is a fact – the tomb was empty – "**God raised from death
the Lord Jesus**"

In preparing for this sermon I was reminded of Mr Thomas Gradgrind, that paragon of
education depicted by Charles Dickens in his novel, *Hard Times*
"*In this life*", he said, "*we want nothing but Facts, Sir; nothing but Facts! Plant
nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning
animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of service to them*".
The fact that we have to proclaim is that God did indeed raise Jesus from the dead.

Listen to the Apostle Paul elaborating upon one of the earliest of Christian creeds: "**I
passed on to you what I received, which is of the greatest importance: that
Christ died for our sins, as written in the Scriptures, that he was buried, and that
he was raised to life three days according to the Scriptures; that he appeared to
Peter and then to all the twelve apostles. Then he appeared to more than 500 of
his followers at once, most of whom are still alive, although some have died.
Then he appeared to James, and afterwards to all the apostles**" (1 Cor 15.3-7).

Yes, the Good News of Easter Day is based on fact.
Tom Wright, the present Bishop of Durham, wrote an exceedingly long and heavy
book – 6 lbs in weight – examining the resurrection of Jesus. After weighing up all
the evidence he concluded: "*The historian, of whatever persuasion, has no option but
to affirm both the empty tomb and the 'meetings' with Jesus as 'historical events'...
they took place as real events; they were significant events; they are, in the normal
sense required by historians, provable events; historians can and should write about
them. We cannot account for early Christianity without them*".

Yes, "**God raised from death the Lord Jesus**".
Hence the title "Lord" bestowed on Jesus. On Easter Day God, as it were, ennobled
his Son – he raised him from the dead, and in so doing, declared the Apostle Paul, he
gave him the name above every name – the name of Lord!

No wonder the writer to the Hebrews adds: "**And to Christ be the glory for ever and
ever**". Yes, glory to the Risen Lord, who is alive for ever more!

2. GLORY TO THE CRUCIFIED LORD

But there is more to Easter than the resurrection of Jesus.

For Easter is also about the cross of Jesus. Or to put it another way, Easter is the moment when God says ‘Yes’ to the Cross of Jesus.

Easter is the moment when God seals his stamp of approval on his Son.

“God has raised from death the Lord Jesus, who is the Great Shepherd of the sheep as the result of his blood, by which the eternal covenant is sealed”.

Or in the more literal translation of the NRSV: **“God... through the blood of the covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus”.**

Both versions depict a link between death and resurrection – but in neither version is the nature of that link clear.

- Is the resurrection dependent upon the cross?
- Or is the cross dependent upon the resurrection?

The answer is ‘Yes and Yes’.

Without the cross there would have been no resurrection.

But likewise without the resurrection the cross would have had no meaning.

The fact is that in raising Jesus from the dead, God declared for all to see that he was at work in the death of Jesus – for there on the Cross he set us free from our past by the blood of Jesus.

And how we need to be to set free! For the unpalatable fact is that all of us, in one way or another, have messed up our lives, and indeed the lives of others.

In the language of the Bible, **“all of us were like sheep that were lost, each of us going his own way”** (Isaiah 53.6).

But, thank God, Jesus, the Great Shepherd of the sheep, has come and found us.

Or to use the metaphor that is present here in Hebs 13.20, Jesus, **the Great Shepherd of the sheep**, became the sacrificial lamb.

For, as the writer of the Hebrews points out, within the rules of the Jewish sacrificial system, **“sins are forgiven only if blood is poured out”** (Hebs 9.22).

Jesus poured out his life for us - and in so doing he dealt with our sin.

Or in the words of Hebs 13.20 Jesus ratified **the new eternal covenant through his blood**

At the time, of course, none of this was clear.

For when Jesus died on the Cross, he died as a criminal.

- He died because the Roman soldiers put him to death.
- He died because Pilate sentenced him to death.
- He died because the Jewish leaders of his day plotted his death.

And yet, God trumped them all.

They thought they had won with their royal flush, as it were.

They thought they were putting Jesus to death.

But in fact Jesus offered up his life for you and me.

- Jesus died because he chose to die for you and me.
- Jesus died to bring you and me back to God.
- Jesus died and in so doing he created a new covenant between God and us – a covenant marked by the forgiveness of sins, and by the life of God himself.

But at the time all this was not clear.

At the time Jesus seemed to have achieved nothing – he seemed to have failed in any mission he might have had. But it was only when God raised him from the dead, that the truth became crystal clear. Only then did it become apparent that what seemed to be defeat was actually victory.

Some of you may have read my Easter booklet, *Easter All Wrapped Up*.

There I drew: “*A parallel ... with [the cross and] what happened in Winchester after the battle of Waterloo in June 1815, when the British under the leadership of the Duke of Wellington were lined up together with their Belgian, Dutch and German allies, against the French ‘Grande Armee’ commanded by Napoleon Bonaparte. After the battle had ended, the news was flashed by semaphore to London, and then from London to the provinces. As the news was conveyed by semaphore to the people of Winchester, the semaphore on top of Winchester cathedral began to repeat the message. Letter by letter it was spelled out: W-e-l-l-i-n-g-t-o-n d-e-f-e-a-t-e-d. But before the message could be completed dense fog suddenly obliterated the semaphore. News of a lost battle quickly spread throughout the town. But later in the day the fog cleared and the people’s sense of deep sadness turned to vibrant joy as the semaphore arm moved again to spell out the completed message: “W-e-l-l-i-n-g-t-o-n d-e-f-e-a-t-e-d t-h-e e-n-e-m-y”.*”

Similarly, there on the Cross Jesus defeated the enemy.

Or to use the language of Hebrews, “**as a result of his sacrificial death**” on the Cross Jesus has dealt with the power of sin – he has freed us from our past - forgiveness and life are ours.

The empty tomb was a sign not just that God was at work on Easter Day, but that he was at work on Good Friday too.

So “**to Christ be the glory for ever and ever**”.

Glory to Jesus, the crucified Lord, who has dealt with our sin!

3. GLORY TO THE PRESENT LORD

But there is even more to the resurrection.

For the resurrection is a powerful sign of what God can do in our lives today.

Listen again to the words of our text: “**God has raised from death our Lord Jesus.... May the God of peace provide you with every good thing you need in order to do his will, and may he, through Jesus Christ, do in us what pleases him**”.

God doesn’t want just to forgive our past, he also wants to work in our lives today.

He wants to give us the power, the energy, to do his will today.

And he can do this through the power he displayed when he raised Jesus from the dead..

Look again at the benediction.

The GNB in seeking to simplify what is a very complex sentence has created two sentences and in so doing broken the link between the resurrection and life today.

Literally the benediction reads. **“May the God of peace, who raised from death our Lord Jesus, provide you with every good thing you need in order to do his will”**

The basis of this prayer is that the same divine energy which raised Jesus from the dead can also be available to us today. Amazingly, the power which shattered the bonds of death for Jesus, can shatter the bonds of sin and failure which all too often hold us in their grip.

Yes, God wants us to put our heart and mind into living for him.

We see that clearly here in the letter to the Hebrews, where the writer is constantly stressing the need for determination, for effort, for patience

“We are all partners with Christ if we hold firmly to the end the confidence we had at the beginning” (3.14)

“Keep up your eagerness to the end, so that the things you hope for will come true. We do not want you to become lazy, but to be like those who believe and are patient, and so receive what God has promised” (6.11,12)

And here in Hebs 13 the writer speaks of the need **“to do his (God’s) will”**.

But there are times when our determination to do God’s will is not enough. For the fact is that our energy and strength will only take us so far.

If we are to do God’s will, then we need to know God’s power at work in our lives.

The good news is that God’s resurrection is on offer to you and me in the here and now - and not just at the gates of death.

The **God who raised from death our Lord Jesus** is the **God** who is able to **provide us with every good thing we need in order to do his will.**

The same thought is found in Eph 1.18-20: **“I ask that your minds may be opened to see his light, so that you will know... how very great is his power at work in us who believe. This power working in us is the same as the mighty strength which he used when he raised Christ from death and seated him at his right side in the heavenly world”**

How do we experience this resurrection power in our lives?

Jesus shows us how: for Jesus the road to Easter Day lay through Good Friday

He only experienced God's power in his life as he surrendered his life on the Cross.

What was true of Jesus is true of you and me: the way to power is the way of self-surrender. We discover God’s power when we actually begin to go his way.

Glory to the present risen Lord! Glory to the Lord who gives us the power to live for him today!

Yes, the good news of Easter Day is not just about the resurrection of Jesus – the good news is that his resurrection can directly affect our lives today.