

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People
Resurrection of the Lord – Year C

RCL Readings – Acts 10:34-43; Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24; 1 Corinthians 15:19-26; Luke 24:1-12

ACNA Readings – Acts 10:34-43; Psalm 118:14-17, 22-24; 1 Corinthians 15:19-26; Luke 24:1-12

Introduction. There are few days to match the joy of Easter Sunday as we celebrate the resurrection of our Lord Jesus. It is a day for wholeheartedly praising the Lord, a day to rejoice in the reminder that we are part of the Kingdom and a day to proclaim to the world that the Lord lives.

Common Theme. The readings pick up on the praise that is due to the Lord as we celebrate the resurrection and how his resurrection has enabled us to rejoice in our own salvation. Those two themes go hand in hand: we celebrate because we are secure in our salvation. The Jewish festival of Passover falls very near Easter this year. At Passover, we remember that the Israelites were freed from slavery in Egypt and led through the Promised Land to Israel. One of the key elements of the story is the Passover Lamb that is sacrificed and whose blood is put on the doorposts of the Israelite houses so that the angel of death will pass over them. This theme is picked up time and again in the NT with references to Jesus being the Passover Lamb, the sacrifice needed for our salvation. This should be remembered as we look at these passages.

Acts 10:34-43. The context of this passage is important. The Roman centurion Cornelius has been spoken to by God and told to summon Peter. Meanwhile, Peter has his vision from God of the sheet descending three times with all kinds of animals on it. He is told to kill and eat anything, but being aware of Jewish law, he objects, stating that he could not eat anything impure. He is told clearly that nothing is impure that God has made clean, which leads him to understand that the Gospel is for Gentiles as well as Jews. We pick up at verse 34 with Peter's statement that God does not show favouritism but accepts people from every nation.

We forget what a radical change of belief this must have been for someone like Peter, who being Jewish, would have known God as the God of Israel, the assumption being Israel only. However, we must never forget that Christianity owes its roots and very being to Judaism. This is reflected in verse 36 where he tells his listeners that it is through the people of Israel, through Jesus of Nazareth that the good news of peace (the Gospel) came and that this Jesus is titled 'Lord of all'. It must never be forgotten that Jesus himself was born, died, resurrected, and ascended as a Jew.

Verses 37 and 38 recount how God reached out through the baptism of John and anointed Jesus with the Holy Spirit and power, following which Jesus began his ministry of healing all who were under the devil, as Scripture puts it. The coming of Jesus is not a new plan for God. The Old Testament is full of references to the future Messiah and that God will work in power. Isaiah 53:4-5 is a clear indication that healing will one day come, so whilst people questioned who Jesus was, God is fulfilling the Hebrew Scriptures.

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From verse 39, Peter wants the crowd to know he is a witness and thus carries authority. We value witnesses today, but in a world where the written word was considerably rarer than it is now, a statement from a witness was impactful. Peter unashamedly recounts Jesus' death and resurrection – two of the most central events in the Gospel message. He goes on to explain the resurrection appearances of Jesus, demonstrating that they were no ghostly appearances as Jesus ate and drank with them.

In verse 42, Peter then explains the command of God to preach to people and testify that Jesus will be the Judge. Verse 43 is our textual proof that the coming of Jesus and the Gospel is not a new plan by God. Peter states that all the prophets have said all along that the one who believes in Jesus will receive forgiveness through his name. However, the prophets don't name Jesus by name. The tension, the surprise here is that if Jesus is the one who forgives, and in the Hebrew Scriptures it is God that forgives, then Jesus must be the LORD (YHWH) of the Tanakh.

Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24. The first thing to note from the introductory two verses is the repetition of “his love endures forever”. God's love is not temporary. He does not start with Israel, stop loving them, then replace them with the Church for that would be contrary to Scripture. Once in the love of God, a person stays there. Verse 14 is a key verse explaining that God will look after Israel and has become their salvation. There is safety and security in the Lord, as we see in the Gospel message. Unsurprisingly, verses 15-16 speak of praise. Let us remember that praise for the work of God is a consistent theme in the Scriptures. Israel had much in which to rejoice.

It would be interesting to know for sure what a Jewish person saying the Psalms pre-Jesus would have understood by “I will not die but live.” Our NT understanding leads us to everlasting life. Although there are hints of this, such as the last verse of Psalm 23 and Job 19:26, the Hebrew Scriptures are not explicit on this subject. I am speculating, but it may have been understood as *I live on for now so that I can let the power of God in my life be known.*

Verse 18 deals with the idea that sin leads to death, which was understood very clearly in the Tanakh. Here the writer explains their chastening from God – God does not let a person go without working in them – and how their life had been saved. The NT of course really explains this in the Gospel message. Our sin separates us from God and is punishable by death (Rom 3:23-25) but the Lord through Jesus has saved us from what we deserve.

In verses 19-21, we read an understanding of the change of status for those who God has blessed. They are no longer to die. They are to live and be called righteous, and more than that they can enter the gate of the Lord. Gates are significant to the Messiah. He was expected to walk through the gate to the temple. Historically, judgement took place at the gates of the city (Gen 19:1, 23:10), and it says in Zechariah 14:4-5 that the Messiah will return to the summit of the Mount of Olives and proceed to the temple. The most direct route would be through the Golden Gate, also known as the Mercy Gate, which was one of the original seven gates around Jerusalem. Ezekiel 44:1-3 also tells us that the Prince of Peace will enter through the Eastern Gate, which would be the Golden Gate.

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Returning to our psalm, we see words that ought to be familiar as they are so often applied to Jesus who himself was rejected yet exalted by the Lord. Isaiah 53, too, speaks of the rejection of God's chosen one and his exaltation, as elsewhere in the Tanakh. What we are seeing time and again is that the Jewish Scriptures are prophesying every aspect of Jesus, and we should see Easter as a fulfilment of those prophecies.

1 Corinthians 15:19-26. In this passage, Paul gives a summary of what we call salvation history, starting with the fact that Jesus has been raised from the dead. This comes on the back of an earlier part of this chapter confirming all the sightings of Jesus and why there is proof of his resurrection (1 Cor 15:5-8). He also calls Jesus the 'first fruits' (v. 20), which is a phrase full of meaning. Jews as far back as the Pentateuch (cf. Deut 18:4 where Israel had been told to offer the first fruits of their harvest to God). As time moved on, firstfruits came to be offered in the temple and were then distributed to the Levitical priests.

Paul makes a clear statement that Christ is the firstfruits of the resurrection, implying that others will follow in resurrection. This reference to firstfruits is not just an empty turn of phrase but a reference to the Feast of Firstfruits. The Church has done a good job of understanding Jesus' death within the context of Passover, helped by the Passover imagery of the Gospels and that Paul overtly calls Jesus our Passover lamb (1 Cor 5:7). The eight-day Passover season is actually three festivals occurring concurrently: Passover, Unleavened Bread, and Firstfruits. While the Pharisaical (and now rabbinical) interpretation of Leviticus 23:9-11 puts the Feast of Firstfruits on the day after the first day of Passover, the Sadducees (who controlled the temple in the first century) read "the day after the Sabbath" as the Sunday after Passover. Jesus was resurrected on the Sunday after Passover, as we affirm with our continued tradition of Sunday worship. Jesus, the first fruits of the dead, was raised back to life on the Feast of Firstfruits.

Firstfruits is also connected to the great Jewish feast of the Harvest of Firstfruits, known as Shavuot/Pentecost (Exod 23:16). Offering the firstfruits communicated an expectation of a fuller harvest as a blessing from God. We begin to see the beginning of that fuller harvest in Messiah in the Pentecost recorded in Acts 2, where we see 3,000 baptised on the same day. The work of calling in believers continues to this day.

The sacrifice of Jesus is not an isolated event for Paul but part of the history of God and humanity. He takes us in verse 21 back to Adam and begins a comparison between Adam and Jesus. Adam brought death through his sin; Jesus brings resurrection through his sacrifice, a point reiterated in verse 22. Following Adam leads to death; following Jesus leads to life. Verse 23 is a further repetition of Jesus being the firstfruits leading to a large harvest when he comes to us. More than that in verse 24, we learn that at the end of this age, when Jesus will have brought his kingdom to fulfilment, he will hand it back to the Father, but not before every power, dominion and authority has been destroyed. God has always said, as seen in the 10 commandments, that there is no God except him, and the end of the age will restore everything back to the one true God of Israel. Too often people are trying to second guess when

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Jesus will return, but he himself said only the Father knows (Matt 24:36). Paul tells us it will never happen until all enemies are put under the feet of Jesus and eventually even death is destroyed. There is clearly some way to go, but if we hold on to the firstfruits teaching, we know that the harvest can and indeed must follow.

Luke 24:1-21. We turn to the Gospel passage following readings of joy and praise and an explanation of why the resurrection matters so much. Luke begins by telling us it was the first day of the week, Sunday. In the Western world, so often Monday is treated as the first day, but in Jewish teaching, it is always Sunday, and it matters here. This is a new beginning for humanity. I do not believe it was a coincidence that Jesus was raised on a Sunday (see discussion of Feast of Firstfruits above). We read that the women were on their way to the tomb and were looking to anoint the body of Jesus in accordance with Jewish burial customs. It is a further reminder of the Jewishness of Jesus. The two men in clothes gleaming like lightning are clearly angels because the women fall down with their faces to the ground, which is the most common reaction to angelic appearances in the Hebrew Scriptures. They are told they are looking in the wrong place for Jesus and should instead remember what the Scriptures had taught, that “The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.” It should be borne in mind that the Scriptures referred to are the Jewish Scriptures. It is never a good idea to separate the life of Jesus and the Gospel message from the Tanakh, as it holds so much related information. It is perhaps not surprising that the women are not believed by the apostles as it is a tough message to grasp. We should give the women the full credit for themselves believing the truth about Jesus and being willing to share it. According to Luke, only Peter was concerned enough to go to the tomb and see things for himself. It may be reading too much into the text, but it is worth considering that each individual needs to respond to the Lord.

About the author. The Revd Mark K. Madeley was born in 1968. He is an Anglican minister ordained into the Church of England in 1993. Having worked in Derbyshire and Yorkshire, Mark moved to Weston-super-Mare (just south of Bristol on the West Coast) in 2012 where he is currently rector of St. Nicholas with St. Barnabas. Mark also owns a travel company, MIB Travel, and since 2010, he has been operating all of the CMJ Shores Study Tours originating in the UK. He is passionate about people going to Israel and learning the truth according to Scripture. He is also president of Christian Friends of Magen David Adom and a vice president of Magen David Adom UK, the UK arm of the Israel ambulance service. He is validated by Durham University as a distance tutor and marks theological and Church history assignments. He is married to Caroline and has two teenage children, Rachel and Benjamin.