

Easter Message **Based on the hymn – Low in the grave He lay**

*[Please note : sections in blue type are not broadcast on every radio station.
The New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

It was during his evening devotions, after being out for a walk on a mild spring evening that Robert Lowry (1826 – 1899) wrote his famous hymn “Christ arose.” Now, almost 150 years later, as we arrive at Easter, I would like to consider the words of his hymn as the basis of our Easter talk for this year. Perhaps like me, you have really missed singing in church over the past year. I long for the time when we can join together and praise the Lord in a way that He deserves. However, you will be glad to hear that I am not going to sing the hymn for you today. As my mum used to say: “No matter how bad things are, you always have something to give thanks for!”

1. “Low in the grave He lay – Jesus, my Saviour!
Waiting the coming day – Jesus, my Lord!

Up from the grave He arose,
With a mighty triumph o’er His foes;
He arose a Victor from the dark domain,
And He lives for ever with His saints to reign!
He arose! He arose!
Hallelujah! Christ arose!
2. Vainly they watch His bed – Jesus, my Saviour!
Vainly they seal the dead – Jesus, my Lord!
3. Death cannot keep his prey – Jesus, my Saviour!
He tore the bars away – Jesus, my Lord!”

As we celebrate Easter Sunday, let us just consider the three verses to this hymn before finishing with some thoughts on the chorus. I want to tie it in with the final verse in 1 Corinthians chapter 13:

“And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.”

To my mind each verse of this hymn reflects one of these abiding characteristics.

Faith: “Low in the grave He lay – Waiting the coming day.”

As that first Easter Sunday dawned, the reality of the situation could not have been more bleak. Jesus was dead. The disciples were defeated, demoralised and distraught. The devil appeared to have swept the board clean and all that was good had gone. “Low in the grave He lay” indeed. I don’t know how your mind works but as I considered this stanza the question struck me: “Why did Jesus not come back to life again whilst on the cross?” Arguably that would have been a more dramatic demonstration of the power of God. It would certainly have removed the excuse given

that the disciples stole the body. The atoning work and substitutionary death would still have been accomplished. How dramatic it would have been if Jesus had released Himself from the nails and come down from the cross, after the centurion had declared Him dead, but now fully alive and without a scratch on Him. It could have happened like that – but it did not. How happy the disciples would have been had events turned out like this. They would have been spared a couple of sleepless nights and wakeful hours of grief. Did Jesus not care about this? Of course He did! However, there is a consideration that has a much higher priority than any of these considerations. In between His death and His resurrection lay the Sabbath – a day of rest, not to sleep in and be lazy, but to enjoy God. In the mighty work that Jesus was going to accomplish in resurrection, of first priority to Him was His enjoyment of His Father God. This was the true purpose of the Sabbath. His body lay still in the grave, but His spirit would commune in perfect rest with the Father, into whose hands He had commended Himself. These were not 24 wasted hours, but time spent in the most profitable activity open to man – communion with God. What an example to us! There is a lost world that needs to be saved. There is a broken church that needs to be healed. There are a thousand and one legitimate claims upon my time from family and friends, work and leisure. But above all these is my responsibility to joy in God. I can so easily become enslaved to a sense of my own importance and feel that everything depends upon me. It takes real faith to wait, not in lazy neglect but in eager anticipation of all that God is going to do. God's plan is best and what He will do is also best. So let us learn this Easter, if we do not do so already, to enjoy God as we wait for Him to accomplish all that he has purposed.

Hope: "Vainly they watch His bed, Vainly they seal the dead."

Today, of all days, we rejoice in the statement of the angels: "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" (Luke 24:5) This verse brings to light two very different hopes – those of the saved and those of the lost. I in no way wish to be critical of those early disciples who visited the tomb. At least they were there! I think if it had been me I would have forsaken Him and fled, and kept on running. I might have been in such a sulk that all my plans were out the window that I was proving to be a grumpy old man at home. Not so the women who came to the tomb. They had prepared spices to embalm the body of the Lord Jesus and now that the Sabbath was over, very early in the morning they were there. Their love for Jesus, even His dead body, compelled them to be active and to do something for Him. But they were too late!

Jesus was already alive – and He is today living in the power of an endless life! The women could watch His bed as much as they liked but it would do them no good at all. They acted in accordance with their thoughts and expectations, and that is always dangerous in God's business. How often throughout the Bible people have done this and come unstuck! Isaac did it when he thought that his oldest son Esau was to be the son of promise. Samuel did it when he went to anoint the next king of Israel, and started with the oldest of David's brothers. Paul did it when he persecuted Christians thinking he was doing God a service. You would have thought that we would have learnt by now that God's work must be done according to God's plan. Today that is through obedience to His word and through the leading of the Holy Spirit. We can all too easily think that we are doing something for God, like the women on the resurrection day, and find that we have turned up at the wrong ball game.

Of course, Mary of Bethany had already anointed Jesus, on the night before His arrest. What a contrast! Jesus told His disciples that she had done this for the day of His burial. She was in time; the other women were not. There is a real lesson for us in this also. Sometimes we make great promises to God and have grand ideas of how we are going to serve Him, or give Him so much once we are ready. Perhaps when I retire, I will serve Him full time. Maybe once the mortgage is paid off I will use that money to further missionary work. Except the Lord might come and all those promises will amount to nothing. Rewards are not given for amazing 5-year plans but for faithful service performed. Is there something that the Lord has laid on your heart that you have been considering but not yet made that first step in performing? Learn the lesson from this resurrection

morning and commit to God now. Jesus is coming again and then all opportunity for faithful service will be past. Now is the time to serve Him.

But let us turn to those who were lost – those who had no hope. “Vainly they seal the dead” – vain indeed.

Luke tells us in Acts 2:24:

“Whom God raised up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that He should be held by it.” Jesus Himself had said: “I lay down My life that I may take it again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again.” (John 10: 17 – 18) And again: “Our Saviour Jesus Christ, who has abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel” (2 Timothy 1: 10).

Did they really think that a few Roman soldiers and a wax seal would do the trick? They could have parked the entire Roman army outside that particular tomb and it would have counted for nothing.

The entire combined arsenals of the USA and Russia intercontinental ballistic missiles could all be pointing to one tiny garden on a hillside outside Jerusalem and it would have made no difference. There was no way in God’s universe that that particular tomb was staying shut. The power of the Almighty God, Creator and Sustainer of the universe was at work here, calling forth His Son: “Jesus Come forth!”

Jesus had exercised His power in laying down His life just days before. Now, as the sinless Son of God, He would exercise that same power to come forth in life – glorious and majestic. Those guards, set to watch the tomb, did not stand a chance. Death itself stood powerless. It had been abolished. It no longer had any force left to apply to Jesus. Today, in the UK the death penalty has been abolished. That means that someone could murder as many people as they liked, safe in the knowledge that they will not face the death penalty themselves. It has no legal force on them. Ah, I hear the sceptic say, “But look at the reality – go to any cemetery and see the grief. Quite clearly death is still all powerful!” To which I would reply, at the same cemetery, “Look properly. Of course there is sorrow at a loved one being missed. That is right and proper. It would be tragic if after many years together a loved one was not missed at all. But death is now the doorway to an endless life. The question is where that life is to be lived?”

The Christian really can view death properly. I have given my wife many happy days! Our wedding day. The days our children were born. The day I gave her a dust bin for Christmas. She might be able to add to this list – the days I kept out of her way probably. But I have no doubts at all that the day she dies will be the best day of her life. *If she dies before me*, I will miss her beyond thinking. My life will be the poorer for her absence, but I know for her, being “with Christ will be far better.” I cannot complain at being second best to the Lord Jesus who will make her far happier than I could ever hope to.

This brings us to the last verse.

Love: “Death cannot keep his prey – He tore the bars away.”

It might seem a strange thing to associate this verse with the thought of love, but I believe it is in there. Let us think about Jesus’ own words:

“Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends” (John 15:13).

Earlier in the same Gospel John writes:

“When Jesus knew that His hour had come that He should depart from this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end” (John 13:1).

And Paul understood the measure of this when he wrote:

“The Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me” (Galatians 2:20).

There can be no greater certainty in life than knowing that we are loved by God. Because there was no alternative to restore a relationship with fallen man, God Himself, in the person of the Lord Jesus, came and died on the cross at Calvary, taking upon Himself the sins of the whole world. Quite simply, He paid for my eternal life by His death. Now if we had been friends with God, this would be still quite amazing. The fact that He did this when we were afar off, at enmity with God, dead in trespasses and sins, takes the amazing to beyond understanding. But let us like Paul just wonder as we recognise that it was for me that He died and it is me whom He loves.

But a dead person does not love anyone and so He tore the bars away. Let me ask those of you who are married: “What did you have to do to win the love of your spouse?” I guess if this was interactive, we might get some real stories. If we were to listen to Jacob, we would hear that he worked for 7 years flat out before being allowed to marry – only to find out on his wedding day that he had been tricked into marrying his beloved’s sister. So, he worked for another 7 years and it seemed like no time at all. If we were to listen to the Shulamite women in the Song of Solomon, we would see a woman restless until she was with her beloved. Happily, a walk in the park and a pie from the chippy was sufficient in my case!

We are reminded that Jesus tore the bars of death away so that He could come forth in endless life to declare His great love for us. That must rank as the most dramatic declaration of love anybody has ever made!

Love is a doing word more than a feeling word. There were no lengths that Jesus would not go to to accomplish His desire that we would be His bride, the church that He loves. He loves us just as we are today, but He loves us too much to leave us that way. And so we know from Ephesians 5: 25 – 27:

“Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her by the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish.”

Past, present and future is here taken care of so far as God is concerned. [Christ](#) has given Himself for us, He is cleansing us and He will present us to Himself perfect.

As you look at the church today, I doubt many of us would have the cheek to claim that we are without spot or that we are glorious. Sadly, the behaviour of many Christians, and the church as an organisation has given many grounds to reject our faith – though they ought never to reject the Lord Himself. But through the wonderful love of the Lord Jesus, there is a day to come when all my imperfections will have been done away with and I become like Him – perfect in every way. I for one am mighty interested to see what person I become – the real me! I can’t wait for the day when my many flaws are a thing of the past.

This verse challenges me in two ways!

Firstly, how big a change will there be between the earthly me and the heavenly me? It ought to be our goal in this life to ensure that when we are taken to heaven, others would say of us that we have hardly changed at all!

Secondly, since Christ is risen, and He is the firstfruits in resurrection, how do I view my own mortality. Sadly, I find too many believers who pay lip service to looking forward to going to be with the Lord Jesus in heaven, but do absolutely everything they possibly can to avoid any risk of dying.

And yet, unless the Lord Himself comes, the only way to heaven is through death. Now I am not suggesting for one minute we should be suicidal, nor even reckless with our lives. Our bodies are His temple, and as such we are to care for our physical bodies in a Christ honouring way. But over the past year I have heard of Christians who will not meet with other Christians in case they catch the virus and so avoid fellowship. I have heard of Christians who will not help out someone in desperate need, for fear of becoming infected themselves. This is not right. Let me be clear, I am not suggesting that we ignore the law, or disregard the guidelines for safe behaviour, but nor should we make them the idol of our lives for safe living that stops us from obeying the clear command of the Lord to meet together when we can do, nor to invest our lives in the well-being of others.

Let us finish then by rejoicing in the words of the chorus of this hymn.

“Up from the grave He arose,
with a mighty triumph o’er His foes;
He arose a victor from the dark domain,
and He lives for ever with His saints to reign!
He arose! He arose!
Hallelujah! Christ arose!”

What a wonderful truth resurrection is! It changed, discouraged and dispirited disciples into fearless followers, ready to lay down their lives in martyrdom. It has the power to similarly change our lives too, some two thousand years later. How wonderfully patient God is, not willing that any should perish, but that all should know the life transforming power of the risen Son of God.

There may not be much to celebrate in this disease-ridden world today but we can certainly look up and rejoice in the absolute certainty of what Christ has done, and the good that does come to us from His completed work. In the middle of the great resurrection chapter, 1 Corinthians 15 we get a section that brims with certainty:

“But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For He must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet” (vv. 20,25).

Jesus Christ has destroyed the power of sin, and death and the devil and God has decreed that He must reign. God will have His answer to Calvary, and it will be seen when every knee in heaven, and on earth and under the earth bows to Him. This is the victory that we celebrate this Easter time, and it is good to remind ourselves of this eternal certainty in an ever-changing world, where we seem to walk amongst shifting sands.

If you are finding life hard, if it seems that all your plans and dreams are turning to dust and life hardly seems worth the living, then today, let the wonderful truth of His resurrection and glorious reign just fill your mind and lift your soul. Perhaps, like me, after you have finished listening to this broadcast, or reading this script, you can sing aloud, wherever you are, “Hallelujah! Christ arose!”

Thank you for listening to the Truth for Today talk based on the hymn “Low in the grave He lay”, talk number T1192.

Please Note:

We encourage you to use this transcript for your personal or group Bible studies. This material should not, however, be used in any publications without the express permission from Truth for Today, whose contact details can be found on page 1.