

## Easter Day 2019

This month's cover of 'the Presbyterian Herald' bears the slogan, 'Easter Changes Everything'. Nice slogan, but could we really believe it?

On the surface things look pretty much the same. The environment seems in serious crisis. Around the globe as one conflict ends another begins. Technology advances but millions remain hungry. As if famines and floods weren't trouble enough, some human beings practise the most appalling cruelty. Such things make optimism appear shallow and naïve. The more understandable option seems the common cynical despair.

Yet Christians stubbornly refuse to stop practising this thing called hope. True, Friday was the very definition of 'atrocious', the finest man who ever lived jealously slandered and executed. Yesterday was bleak, prospects reduced to zero.

But this is Sunday, the Lord's Day. The day on which disciples of Jesus went to the tomb and found it empty, the day on which Mary Magdalene heard a familiar voice speak her name, the day on which the God-given Saviour for the world rose from the dead!

In time they all saw Him, witnessed His scarred hands and side, heard His words of reassurance and instruction.

This is Sunday, the day the Lord has made his own, the day He demonstrated victory over death and we will rejoice and praise His name! He is the winner. He is Lord and we who follow Him will not be denied this celebration!

For why? Let's note from Scripture the implications of Jesus' death and resurrection. We read here of peace, of joy, the forgiveness of sins and the promise of life.

He greets His followers with 'Shalom!' but it's more than a common greeting. It literally means, 'May the peace of God be with you!' Through His atoning death, and because he is risen and ever lives to pray for us as our great High Priest, believers in Jesus have peace with God. We are reconciled to our Maker, the Holy Judge. We can call Him 'our Father' and trust Him to provide all our needs.

The next generation would see no let up in opposition as the powers of hell tried in vain to stop the spread of this good news. Across the empire Christians would be brutally persecuted as we see happening again today. The world

resents the Church for our exclusive claim that Jesus is the only way to God, and for His moral teaching. They may ridicule us or worse but they cannot rob us of our peace, the peace of a soul stilled by the love of God, redeemed by the blood of the Lamb!

With this peace comes joy, the disciples were overjoyed when they saw Jesus alive again. They were still in danger, they could never return to their former lives and careers. The short term future still held much uncertainty but right there and then they didn't mind. Their Master had defeated death. This opened a whole new perspective. They had rejoiced previously to see the lame walk, the blind see, the hungry fed and the oppressed delivered but this took things to a whole new level. Not even death can separate us from the love of God in Christ our Saviour!

So we grieve, naturally. We grieve having to say goodbye to a loved one but now we know the separation is temporary. We grieve over the suffering in this present world, but the Lord is returning soon to make all things new. We grieve over the spiritual blindness and lostness of our fellow human beings but not as those who have no hope! We rejoice in a crucified but risen Lord Who holds the future in His strong but gentle, love-scarred hands!

Fundamental to this peace and joy is something we cannot gloss over, the forgiveness of sins. Many would like to ignore this part. The world hates this truth. We resent having to acknowledge we're wrong or have failed. We employ distraction, brushing personal faults under the carpet. We criticise others, the government, foreigners, paedophiles. Meanwhile we change the law and pretend evil things are good and acceptable. We demand freedom to sin as a human right. And look where it gets us – witness the sad, selfish, violent and rapacious society we are becoming! We can try to hide it but no amount of shopping or entertainment can take away our disobedience before God!

The world makes a joke of sin, but it's not a light hearted thing to the Lord. On this first Easter Sunday Jesus authorises His disciples to declare forgiveness of sins to all who trust in Him. God hates sin. It's not allowed into heaven. Be warned - those who refuse to repent remain unforgiven and condemned! But God so loves the sinners of this world He gave Jesus to be the offering of atonement that whosoever humbly believes in Him will not perish in their sin but have everlasting life!

Of course good news only helps us if we are willing to accept it. Those who do are assured of life, in all its fulness and forever. So writes eyewitness John as he comes towards the end of his Gospel. This is why he has written it, to

persuade us that Jesus is the Son of God, the Saviour so desperately needed by the world.

‘These things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ’ he writes, ‘and that by believing you may have life in His name.’ Those who trust in Jesus are filled with the Holy Spirit, reborn inside to live like Him and for Him until one day we are blessed to meet Him face to face.

Easter Sunday, this is a good day, the day Jesus rose. But another day is coming, the day of His return. ‘The Lord Himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God ‘and we, who trust in Him will rise too.

So we don’t practise glib, ill-founded optimism, nor do we grieve like others with no light of comfort. We encourage each other with these words of God.

We are Christians. We practise hope.

Amen