

Death, where is your sting?

Text: John 20:1-18

Theme: Death, where is your sting?

Sermon delivered by Reverend Dele Agbelusi at the Easter Sunday Service, 24/04/2011 at 10:30am.

I read a story about a family on vacation that was travelling in their car, with the windows rolled down, as they enjoyed the warm breeze of the sunny day. All of a sudden, a big black bee darted in the window and started buzzing around inside the car. A little girl, highly allergic to bee stings, cringed for fear in the backseat. If she was stung, she could die within an hour.

“Oh, Daddy,” she squealed in terror, “It’s a bee! It’s going to sting me!” The father pulled the car over to a stop, and reached back to try to catch the bee. Buzzing around toward him, the bee bumped against the front windshield where the father traps it in his fist. Holding it in his closed hand, the father waited for the inevitable sting. The bee stung the father’s hand and in pain, the father let go of the bee. The bee was loose in the car again. The little girl again panicked, *“Daddy, it’s going to sting me!”* The father gently said, *“No honey, he’s not going to sting you now. Look at my hand.”*

The bee’s stinger was there in his hand. Paul could not hold his excitement in 1 Corinthians 15:55, *“Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death is your sting?”* Jesus says to us, *“Look at my hands.”* He has Satan’s sting, the sting of death, the sting of sin, the sting of deceit, the sting of feeling worthless. Jesus has all of those stingers in his hands. When you see that nail-scarred hand, realize that, on your behalf, Jesus took all the pain that Satan could throw at Him. He reduced Satan to a big black bee that’s lost its stinger - all Satan can do is buzz. That’s the victory that Jesus won for you.

On the resurrection morning, John’s record of events indicated that Mary Magdalene went to the tomb while it was still dark. The phrase “while it was still dark,” is greatly suggestive. I am of the opinion that the darkness was not only a description of the time of the day, but it was also a description of all people without a firm belief in the Resurrection of Christ. Without that knowledge, as St. Paul has said, ‘we are a bunch of miserable human beings,’ because we have no understanding of the eternal and sacred character of human life, and for anyone trying to live it, it is a process of stumbling along in the darkness. Mary Magdalene was actually in the dark as she found it hard to comprehend that Jesus Christ was not in the tomb. But she was not alone. Perhaps some of you reading this find it hard to believe the resurrection story.

If you are, don't think you are alone. All you have to do is read the gospels, and see that even the disciples didn't believe the news they heard. Even the disciples doubted the Resurrection! In Luke 24:11, for example, the disciples called it an *“idle tale,”* and when Mary Magdalene came to the empty tomb, her first thought was that someone had stolen the body (John 20:2). When Peter saw the tomb, Scripture says he *“wondered”* at it; he couldn't figure out what had happened (Luke 24:12). Thomas wouldn't believe until he could touch Jesus' wounds (John 20:25).

But from its very earliest days, the church insisted on an actual, physical Resurrection. They insisted that Jesus rose bodily from the grave. In fact, Paul put the matter as plainly as it can be put: *“If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain, and all your faith is in*

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vain” (1 Corinthians 15:14). Everything depends upon the Resurrection. You might pray to God daily and earnestly strive to love your neighbour as yourself. But in the end, the whole Christian faith hinges on one question, and one question only: was Jesus Christ actually raised from the dead?

If you find it hard to believe, then I will try to help you with your unbelief today. I will speak to you of faith, where finally, the question ends. But first, let's approach it with some logic. Let us begin by asking ourselves: how can we logically explain what really happened on Easter morning?

If you think about it, there are mainly four possible explanations. The first is that the enemies of Jesus took His body after it was laid in the tomb.

I can't imagine why the Romans or the high priests would do this, since they held Jesus in such contempt - witness the way they treated Him at His death! But suppose they did take the body, for whatever reason, then, as the gospel of Jesus Christ began to spread, they only had to produce the body and burst the bubble of the good news based on a resurrected Christ. All they had to do was say, 'Look! Here is the body of the Man you say has risen.' Their struggle with the Christian church would have been over; the gospel of Jesus Christ would have died then and there. The early church was sorely persecuted, first by the Jewish authorities and then by the Romans. Both saw the church as a threat, and the Emperor Nero even blamed Christians for the fire which destroyed Rome in 64 A.D. If these enemies of Jesus did have the body, they surely would have produced it and put an end to a church which they considered dangerous and subversive.

The second explanation is that Jesus' friends took His body from the tomb. We know the High Priests were worried about this: Matthew's gospel tells us that they went to Pilate and asked that a guard be put on the grave. "*Make the grave secure,*" they said, "*lest His followers claim He has risen from the dead, and this last fraud will be worse than the first*" (Matthew 27:64). But why would the disciples die for a fraud? If they really did steal the body, then they knew they were perpetrating a hoax, and who will willingly die for a hoax? Again, we know that the early Christians suffered unto death for their faith, and they didn't die easily or painlessly. They were crucified. They were burned. They were ripped apart by lions for the amusement of the Colosseum crowd. I know that people will die for an idea but hardly will a bunch of cowards die for a cause which they knew was a lie.

The strongest proof of the Resurrection is the witness of the Christian martyrs. They obviously thought they had seen the Risen Christ in the flesh, and not just a ghost or an hallucination. There is no other way to explain their willingness to joyfully suffer and die for what they believed.

A third possibility was discussed in a book some years back, where the author tried to prove that Jesus was still alive when they took Him off the Cross. The book argued that Jesus arranged to take a drug which made Him appear dead, and then He was taken away somewhere to live out His normal life. The Muslims have a similar belief about Jesus. They argued that God would not allow his holy prophet to die on the cross. But again you have to ask: who would die for a fraud? Do you really think Peter and James and all the others would willingly be martyred for someone who had faked His own execution?

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There is another problem with this explanation. We know that the Romans were ruthlessly efficient in crucifixions. They did it often and knew what they were doing. Moreover, Mark's gospel says that Pilate made certain Jesus was dead before he gave the body to Joseph of Arimathea for burial (Mark 15:45), which is entirely consistent with what we know about Roman crucifixions. It was customary for the soldiers to periodically check a prisoner on the cross, and if he was taking too long to die, they would break his legs to make him die more quickly. The Romans couldn't have been fooled. They were simply too experienced, too cruel, and too thorough to believe that they would let Jesus come down from the Cross alive and breathing.

If Jesus was really dead on the Cross, and if neither His enemies nor His friends took the body from the tomb, there is only one other possible explanation - **that Jesus rose from the dead just like the gospels say He did!**

There are other details given in the gospels which suggest that Easter happened just the way the Bible says it happened. The Bible story could not have been presented the way it is if the intention was to perpetuate a hoax.

First, there is the matter of women. Women in that day were not even second-class citizens; they were property. My apology to our women and thank God for Jesus Christ who saw them as people, like other sinners for whom he died. They had little public credibility, yet the first testimony to the Risen Christ was given by a woman. More than that, the woman was Mary Magdalene, a former prostitute! If the gospel writers were concocting a story, and if they wanted to appeal to the strict moral sensibilities of their world, don't you think they would have had a man - and a righteous man at that - as the first witness to the Resurrection?

And what of the disciples, the pillars of the early church? They were too scared to go out to the tomb, and when Mary came back with the news, they clearly did not believe her. And it was written down in their record. You see, the people who write history have a way of making themselves look good. Read the memoirs of former presidents or famous industrialists and see how they take credit for the good things that happened and blame someone else for the bad. But here in the gospels, the disciples are not at all heroic! We can only conclude that they told the story just as it really happened.

Paul says that if Christ has not been raised, then he, Paul, is a fraud, a charlatan and a hustler. Every Christian preacher who ever lived - including the one who is preaching to you now - is a fraud if Christ was not raised from the dead.

If Jesus Christ has not been raised from the tomb, then the enemies of Christ win. Rome wins. There is no hope for the world - we are doomed to wars without ceasing and injustice without end. Only the strong shall survive, and the meek shall never inherit the earth. If Jesus Christ has not been raised from the tomb, there is no morality worth believing in, and history belongs to the forces of darkness. If Jesus Christ has not been raised from the tomb, says Paul, then all your faith is in vain. Your faith is shallow and empty, for what else can you believe in but Jesus Christ?

But in the end, it is a matter of faith. Logic can only prepare you to believe; faith makes you believe. It is something you cannot explain, because faith is finally a gift from God.

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“*Why do you look for the living among the dead?*” (Luke 24:5). Many of us still look for Jesus among the dead. There are those who regard him as the greatest man and the noblest hero who ever lived, as one who lived the loveliest life ever seen on earth; but who then died. If that is all you believe Jesus Christ is, you might as well be a Hindu or a Muslim or...

There are those who regard Jesus simply as a man whose life must be studied, his words examined, his teaching analysed. But Jesus is not only someone to be studied; he is someone to be met and lived with every day. There are those who see in Jesus the perfect pattern and example. He is that but a perfect example can be the most heartbreaking thing in the world. He is not simply a model for life; he is a living presence to help us to live.

This makes all the difference. Everything we are, everything we hope for and live for, everything we believe depends on this. He has given us the victory we couldn't win for ourselves, and the power to live in the fullness of God's grace. Now we all can come to the empty tomb and say, ‘I believe.’ Now we all can lift up our voices and say of our Risen Lord, “*Because He lives, I can face tomorrow, Because He lives, all fear is gone. Because I know He holds the future. And life is worth the living just because He lives.*” (Gloria William Gaither). Today we all may say, ‘Why seek the living among the dead? He is not here, He is Risen! Christ the Lord is Risen today! Alleluia! Glory to God in the Highest! My preaching is not in vain. My faith is not in vain. My living is not in vain, because Jesus Christ is raised up from the dead, to live and reign forevermore, worlds without end. Amen.’

If the Jesus story ended with his death, then the disciples could simply be “the eleven,” and after the appropriate rituals and a season of mourning, they could go back to life as it was. But if the news of Easter is true, they must become “apostles,” those sent to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth. When Mary wanted to cling to Jesus, she was clearly instructed to let go and become the channel whereby the good news of Christ resurrection would be shared with others. She, like many of us, would have loved to remain at the tomb site with Jesus alone! Isn't that the way many of us practise our Christianity? We come to church on Sunday and that is all we do until the following week. It is as though Jesus Christ is kept somewhere at a corner in the church to be brought out every Sunday. Christ is telling you, ‘Go, and spread the good news to those who are still in the dark about my resurrection and the power I make available to those who believe in me.’

The empty tomb of Jesus holds great promises for us. A promise is simply an assurance that statements that have been made are sure and true. By faith we are assured of the promises of an empty tomb:

1. An empty tomb promises fulfilled prophesy.

An empty tomb promises to compel us to trust Jesus' claim that He is the Messiah (Luke 24:44; Psalms 16:8-11). No other person can make this claim. Mohammad's tomb in Medina is not empty. Buddha's ashes are still in various temples throughout Asia. Lenin's body is still in Red Square. And yet the tomb of God's chosen is empty because He is the Messiah, the Christ.

2. An empty tomb promises that Jesus is deity.

Only deity can raise themselves from the dead. In John 10:17-18, Jesus says that He had the power to raise Himself from the dead.

3. An empty tomb promises to comfort us with the hope of being with the Lord.

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In John 13:31-35, Jesus tells His disciples that He will be leaving them soon. You can imagine how this troubled them. But He comforted them with these words, “*I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also*” (John 14:3). In his letter to the Thessalonians (1 Thessalonians 4:16-18), Paul urged them to comfort one another with the hope of the resurrection of the dead and the ascension of the living to meet Jesus in the air. Even today it brings us great comfort that the promise of the resurrection remains because of the empty tomb.

4. An empty tomb promises to relieve our fears of death because death has lost its sting.

“*The sting of death is sin*” (1 Corinthians 15:56). Without sin there would be no death. Without death we would not feel the sting that comes with dying. Because we are raised in the same manner as He was (1 Corinthians 15:15-19) then the Christian has nothing to fear because of the empty tomb.

5. An empty tomb promises victory over the grave.

Paul reminds us that “*Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you*” (Romans 8:11). My friends the grave could not contain the Saviour, and it cannot contain us. The power that raised Jesus from the grave is the same power that will raise us from the grave at the last trumpet call (1 Corinthians 6:14, 15:52).

Right now, we have been saved to serve. The tyranny of Satan has been broken. Christ has set us free from whatever is preventing us from being who God wants us to be. Let me close by retelling a story I read about a pastor:

Murmurs rippled through the congregation when Reverend George Thomas placed a rusty old bird cage on the pulpit. The church members weren't used to their pastor using props in his sermons - especially not on Easter Sunday. Sensing the congregation's confusion, Reverend Thomas explained how he had obtained the cage.

It seems that the day before, he had been walking through town when he noticed a young boy carelessly swinging the cage around. Thomas noticed that there were three obviously frightened little birds inside the cage. The pastor stopped the youngster and asked, “What have you got there, son?” “Just some old birds,” came the reply. “And what are you going to do with them,” he asked. “Take ‘em home and have some fun with ‘em,” the boy said. “I’m gonna poke ‘em and pull out their feathers and watch ‘em fight. I’m gonna have a real good time.” “But those birds don’t belong to you,” said the pastor. “They do now,” the boy responded. “I found ‘em and I can do anything I want with ‘em.” “But you’ll get tired of playing with those birds, son. What will you do with them then?” “Oh, I’ve got some cats,” grinned the boy. “They like birds. I’ll give ‘em to my cats.” The pastor was silent for a moment. Then he asked, “How much do you want for those birds, son?” “You don’t want these birds, mister,” said the boy. “They’re just plain old field birds. They don’t sing. They ain’t even pretty.” “How much?” The boy sized up the pastor as if he were crazy and said, “Ten bucks.” The pastor reached into his pocket and took out a ten dollar bill. He placed it in the boy’s hand. In a flash, the boy was gone. The pastor set the cage down, opened the door, and gently coaxed the birds out, setting them free.

The congregation listened quietly as the pastor told of his encounter with the boy. Then he told them another story.

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One day Jesus and the devil were having a conversation. Satan had just come from the Garden of Eden, grinning and boasting. "I just caught me a bunch of people down there. Set me a trap! Used bait I knew they couldn't resist! Got 'em all!" "What are you going to do with them?" Jesus asked. "Oh, I'm gonna have fun with them. I'm gonna teach them how to hurt and abuse each other. I'll teach them how to marry and divorce each other, lie to each other, and kill each other. Oh, I'm gonna really have a good time!" "But those people don't belong to you," said Jesus. "They do now! I can do anything I want with them."

"And what will you do when you get through with them?" asked Jesus. "I'll kill them." "How much do you want for them?" "Oh, you don't want these people," said the devil. "They're no good. You may love them, sure, but they'll just hate you back. They'll spit on you, curse you, and kill you. You don't want these people."

*"How much?" Jesus asked. Satan sized up Jesus as if he were crazy and said, "**Your life.**"*
(Youth Specialties)

Jesus paid the price of your sin and your bondage to sin. The price was his life. But on that first Easter Sunday morning, he picked up the cage, he opened the door, and he set us free. We are set free to fly. Go now therefore and live in the power of Christ's resurrection and tell others about what you have experienced.