

## Good News is Springing Up - The Power of the Gospel to Bring New Life

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(based on Acts 4:32-35, 1 John 1:1-2:2, John 20:19-31)

We are now a week past Easter - the greatest event in the history of religion. A man was crucified, and his body put in a tomb. Three days later he rose from the dead and appeared bodily to scores of people over the course of the next 40 days. After that he ascended to heaven as his followers watched him go. It seemed unbelievable that all these events could be true, but his disciples gave testimony to their reality and his teachings were spread to the world. Today we continue in a long line of followers of Jesus since his time on earth.

Years ago, psychiatrist Scott Peck began a book with the now well-known words - Life is Difficult. Both believer and non-believer in today's world are well aware of that fact. In the midst of the darkness, we so often encounter does the gospel still have that life transforming power? It seems too good to be true that through believing in Jesus and these events that we read in Scripture that we can find forgiveness of sin and power to live a different life than our internal nature often seems to fight against. Can we be lights to others in the frustration and discouragement of a Covid infested world? In those first months after Jesus had left the earth, we have a stunning demonstration of people living by a new set of values in the account of the early church in Acts 4. We read how the believers were unified in one heart and mind and were selling their possessions and giving to the needy. That is not a normal human activity as usually people try to accumulate all they can for themselves and build their own asset security system. Those early Christians were different because they had found a focus and impetus that moved them to adopt a new set of values. Instead of following what had been the norm in their daily living where they attempted to adhere to religious rules, they had tapped into an energy source that brought real transformation to their lives.

A few weeks ago, Pam encouraged me to buy an electric bike - an e-bike, as I had trouble keeping up with her when we would ride together. I scoffed at the idea as I said I didn't need that kind of cheating on a ride. However, just a few days later we heard that Costco was selling e-bikes, so I decided to have a look. Since they were selling out quickly, I knew I needed to decide then and there if I would take the plunge as there wouldn't be another chance with the explosion of bike sales during Covid. I brought it home and took it for a ride the next day. I couldn't believe the difference it made! I could pedal in any of the 21

gears and then decide on any one of 9 levels of power assist to my pedaling. It felt so natural and suddenly my tired old muscles could propel me along at a steady rate of 28 kilometers per hour with the same energy it used to take to go 5 kilometers per hour. Going against the wind I merrily passed Pam as she struggled to keep up using the old-fashioned method of energy output from her legs and lungs.

It seems to me that the transforming energy of the gospel's power has some parallels with my experience on an e-bike. I pedaled in the same way I always had in my 6 decades of bike riding. Yet with a quiet unseen power force available simply by pushing a button I could suddenly ride with the stamina of a Lance Armstrong - pre steroids of course. For the followers of the law in Jesus' day they had so many rules and restrictions to adhere to in order to be recognized as a true believer. They went through the motions and it did bring a certain sense of satisfaction and peace if they felt they were keeping up with all the requirements. However, after Jesus rose from the dead and the Holy Spirit came to live within them, they suddenly had an energy and vitality to their faith that they never thought possible. They were motivated to share their possessions, they wanted to tell the world about the grace and forgiveness they had experienced, they felt alive and full of joy because they knew now that faith was tangible and real and powerful. They might have been living as followers of God before but after the resurrection everything was different. I had ridden a bicycle before but with an e-bike it took riding to a whole new experience of pedal transportation.

In the verses in first John the apostle talks about the eternal life that was with the Father and has now appeared to us. He talks about fellowship, about walking in the light, about forgiveness and purification, about having an atoning sacrifice, not only for our sins but also for the sins of the whole world. John was thrilled with the difference the gospel had made and was making in his life and the lives and countless other people.

A few weeks ago, a former parishioner asked me to lead a graveside service for his 84 year old wife. She had died in her sleep with no prior indication of illness. As we talked, he told me how in the days preceding she had asked him if he had heard the music in their apartment that she was hearing, and the song was - "the King is coming". He said that he hadn't heard it and even went into the hallway of their building and listened at people's doors to see who might be playing the music. He didn't find the source, but his wife had always told him she would like to die in her sleep, and it seems she had heard the king calling when no one else did. Living for the king transforms us from living for ourselves

to being sensitive to the still small voice of God's spirit. Faith in Jesus makes a tangible difference in people's lives.

Yet even as I recount the joys of living in faith and its transforming power, I am reminded of faithful believers who don't see their prayers answered or experience the nearness of God's spirit to eliminate the rough spots. I think of my pastor friend who has gone blind and who has lived with daily chronic pain since the age of 18. I think of my childhood friend whose wife told us recently that he had tried to commit suicide once again. I think of the grieving widow and children of a 68 year old cousin who died suddenly of a massive heart attack after a bike ride and who interestingly, had an e-bike on order that was due to arrive this month. These last three examples are all people who had a strong faith, but that faith doesn't spare us from pain and suffering.

On the other hand, the gospel continues to be good news and it has remarkable transforming power. We just need to be careful that we don't try to legislate how it should work in each individual life and experience. We all need to let that seed of the gospel grow within us but then also be prepared for the tailor-made journey that God has called each of us to walk as we make our way through life. For some the journey seems overwhelming in the degree of hardship they are called upon to face. For others it seems like their every prayer is answered and they reach death's door unscathed. From my perspective we need to hold to our faith both tightly and loosely. Tightly because in Jesus we truly have the word of life and the source of all hope for this life and the life to come. Loosely because no matter how strong our faith we may be thrust into situations that seem to defy logic that there could ever be a God who cared about us. We need to guard against a theology that has parameters that are too narrow to allow the many varied facets of individual experience.

A further Scripture passage for today is the account of Jesus meeting with the disciples after the resurrection but Thomas had missed the encounter and refused to believe their report. The following week he too had the opportunity to meet Jesus and responded with the words - My Lord and my God. Sometimes Jesus seems very near to us, sometimes he seems far away. However, the words he used three times in these two encounters with the disciples was the statement - "Peace be with you". We need to remember that whatever our situation Jesus is offering us that peace that can help us to cope. The gospel does continue to transform and bring new life, but we need to embrace Jesus and the peace that he offers "day by day and with each passing moment". May you experience that peace today.