

Where To After Easter?

When I was 15 years old I went to an Easter Camp. We had an amazing time, with several hundred of us young people all together for the whole weekend. Even though that was nearly 45 years ago, we did things that were similar to what happens in Easter Camps now. We stayed up till all hours of the morning talking, and gave the leaders a bit of a hard time. We played sports in the afternoons, and a few of the guys who wanted to prove to the girls how bullet proof they were got carted off to hospital. The guys eyed up the girls and the girls eyed up the guys, and some of us got together. A few of us, like Lyn and I, eventually married each other, so I've got a lot to be grateful for from Easter Camps. Like today, we had different speakers who told us about Jesus, and how He could make our lives different. I remember this one guy who spoke. He talked about how Jesus died for me. Even though I had heard that plenty of times before, when he invited people to publicly declare whether they were going to follow Jesus, I had this huge battle going on in my heart. One part of me was saying, "Yes, this is what you want". But the other part of me was saying "What will your friends think of you if you make it public that you want to follow Jesus?"

That spiritual battle was so strong, I was literally hanging on to my seat until my knuckles were turning white. But I found myself walking to the front, with tears streaming down my face, having this encounter with the risen Jesus that has absolutely changed the whole course of my life. Never before had anything been so real. I felt like I was glowing with the life of Jesus within me, as I gave him permission to take control of my life. That night I was so excited I could hardly sleep. I wanted to stay at Easter Camp forever. I wanted life to be just one long Easter camp, with all my friends there, doing the sort of stuff that made it so good.

When I got home from camp I was still buzzing with it. I told my Mum, and she was really pleased for me. But the big test was when I got back to school. About half way through the first morning back at school, my best friend said to me "So, what's happened to you? Have you got a new girlfriend or something?" He could see that I was different. One of my lasting regrets to this day is that I didn't tell him that I had an encounter with Jesus.

So what do you do after Easter? That was the dilemma for the followers of Jesus, and it's our dilemma too. After you have had such a spiritual rush, what do you do for an encore? The disciples had been through a real emotional and spiritual roller coaster weekend. The last Passover with Jesus, then his arrest and trial. Hardly any sleep. Then the horror of the crucifixion. Hiding together wondering if they too were going to be arrested and crucified. Then the amazing discovery that the tomb was empty and Jesus making appearances all over Jerusalem. How do you cope with that? What do you do after an Easter like that?

Here are three things they could have done.

1. **Stay around the empty tomb all day.**

They could have put up a tent outside the empty tomb and made it into a bit of a shrine. They could have lived there, and sold tickets to people who wanted to visit. They could even have made a lot of money out of it. "Come and see where Jesus was. See the rock where the angel sat. For 50 bucks we will let you touch the grave clothes!"

But you can't just stay at the place of the empty tomb and put up a tent and live there. As the angel said "He is not here – he is risen". Some people do just hang around the places where great things happened. They just keep re-creating the great experiences of the past. Ask them to tell you about when Jesus was real to them and they will keep referring back to great times twenty or more years ago. It's not that you forget what God did in the past, but you can't keep going back and living on those experiences.

If you go to Israel today to see the places where Jesus walked, it can be quite a disappointment. Almost every place where Jesus walked has a church built over it. The place where Jesus was born is now covered by the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. It's nearly always guarded by soldiers ready to prevent an extremist attack. The place where Jesus was crucified has the church of the Holy Sepulchre

built over it. If that is the right place. There is a case to be made that the place where Jesus was crucified is now covered by a bus station. The church of the Holy Sepulchre is administered by different Christian groups, all of whom fight and squabble with each other. If you go to the garden on the Mount of Olives there are some olive trees that are 2000 years old, but there is no guarantee that this is the garden where Jesus prayed. The tour guides will take you on a road which they say is the road to Emmaus, where Jesus talked with the two after his resurrection. It leaves you with a bit of a buzzy feeling to think that this is where Jesus walked, but then you find that there are four different places that could have been Emmaus, and no one knows which one is the right one.

One of the most and peaceful places in Jerusalem is the garden tomb. In this garden is a tomb which dates back to the time of Jesus. It's got a channel carved out of the stone in front of the entrance to the tomb which was there for a stone to be rolled in front of the entrance. There is a visible crack in the rock near the entrance to the tomb, which is evidence of an earthquake that split the rock. You can go down into the tomb, and see the place where a body would have been laid, but there is no guarantee that this is the actual tomb where the body of Jesus was laid. You can get all sentimental about these places, but it's not the same as meeting Jesus. All you are doing is following in the footsteps of someone else who met Jesus.

To stay around the empty tomb all day is to make a decision to stand still in your Christian faith. It's a decision to stagnate. Here's the second thing the disciples could have done.

2. Get together to share experiences.

That's what the disciples did. The disciples had been together with Jesus for three years. They had been through all sorts of amazing experiences with each other that had bonded them together as a team. They had been together when Jesus had fed 5000 people from a little boys lunch. They had been there when he had opened the eyes of the blind and made broken bodies walk. They had been there when he had made the dead come to life. They had been to weddings and parties with him. It had been an incredible three years that had changed their lives forever. No doubt they had heaps of stories they could share together.

"Do you remember when we went out two by two and we saw people healed and cast out demons? Do you remember when we were on the top of that mountain and Moses and Elijah showed up and talked with Jesus? Do you remember when we were out in the boat and Jesus came walking across the water and Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water to meet him? Man, weren't those such good days."

The Returned Serviceman's Association has been a wonderful organisation to care for soldiers who have fought together in wars. In a war, when your life depends on the person next to you, you become incredibly close. Returned soldiers have this relationship with each other that other people don't understand because they haven't been through that same experience. It's been very therapeutic and healing for some returned servicemen to be able to get together down at the RSA and have a drink with their old war buddies and share stories together. But if the church just becomes a gathering of Christians who get together to tell stories about what they did with Jesus in the past, then we are not much different from the RSA.

If the disciples had simply stayed together for the rest of their lives to share stories about their time with Jesus, the Christian faith would never have spread around the world the way it has. Those of you that have been at Easter Camp have had some great things happen in the weekend, but you can't keep living on past experience. In a years time, what will you be talking about if you are asked to tell about a recent encounter with Jesus? Will you have something up to date to tell?

3. Go back to work.

That's what the disciples did.

"Afterward Jesus appeared again to his disciples, by the Sea of Galilee. It happened this way: Simon Peter, Thomas (also known as Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together. "I'm going out to fish," Simon Peter told them,

and they said, "We'll go with you." So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus. He called out to them, "Friends, haven't you any fish?" "No," they answered. He said, "Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some." When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish. Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" As soon as Simon Peter heard him say, "It is the Lord," he wrapped his outer garment around him (for he had taken it off) and jumped into the water. The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net full of fish, for they were not far from shore, about a hundred yards. When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread. Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish you have just caught." So Simon Peter climbed back into the boat and dragged the net ashore. It was full of large fish, 153, but even with so many the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." None of the disciples dared ask him, "Who are you?" They knew it was the Lord. Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead." (John 21:1-14 NIV)

After Jesus had risen from the dead, and all the excitement had died down, they went back to familiar territory, the Sea of Galilee. They went back fishing. That's what they knew best. What do you do after you have left your business and followed Jesus for three years, and then the whole thing turns to custard? Jesus is killed, then rises from the dead and disappears. What do you do? You can't just hang around doing nothing. You still have to make some money to live on. So they went back fishing. At least they were still good at that – or so they thought.

Unless you have got some abnormal lifestyle, I suspect that for most of you, your response to Easter has been to go back to the normal routines of your week. Back to school. Back to University. Back to work. Back to families with grumpy kids, loads of washing, school lunches and smelly socks. Back assignments and exams. Back to trying to make the finances stretch a little further. Back to coping with flatmates that are a pain, too much time pressure and not enough hours in the day and so on. And in a few days Easter wears off as you settle back into the familiar routine. And sometimes, like the disciples, it's back to the frustration of doing the thing you think you know best, and it all turns to custard. Like fishing all night and catching nothing.

Meeting Jesus in familiar places.

Now here's the encouraging bit out of this story. It was while the disciples were back doing the familiar things, that they met Jesus again. They had another Easter experience with Jesus, but this time it wasn't in Jerusalem next to an empty tomb, or in an upstairs room where they had locked themselves away, but in a place that they knew well on lake Galilee. What Jesus did just blew them away. Having slogged away all night and caught nothing, they were tired and no doubt pretty brassed off. If you have ever spent the whole night doing something you think you are good at, and it all turns to custard, you will know how they felt.

Right at the point where they thought it was hopeless, Jesus showed up, and as the result of His intervention, they finished up with 153 big fish. Why 153? Over the years there have been some pretty fanciful answers to that question.

One of the early church Fathers called Cyril of Alexandria said that 100 represented the fullness of the Gentiles, 50 represented the remnant of Israel and the remaining three were for the Trinity! Jerome, another early Christian writer, reckoned there were 153 different types of fish in the sea, and that it was symbolic of the church reaching all the people in the world. Augustine reckoned that there are 10 commandments, and 7 is the perfect number of grace, so $10 + 7 = 17$. if you add all the numbers from 1 to 17 together it comes to 153. And if you arranged all the fish with 17 in the first row and 16 in the next right down to 1 in the last row, it comes to a perfect triangle, which represents the Trinity.

Do you want to know why it's mentioned? Here's my theory. Wait for it, because this is really profound. It's mentioned because somebody counted and there were 153 fish in the net. More than they could cope with. A huge number. A big miracle.

That's what Jesus does. He meets us where we are, in our familiar place – at work, or school, or university or at home and he keeps doing Easter stuff in our lives. He keeps showing us Gods power. His power to break out of the empty tomb is the same power that produces 153 fish, helps us pass exams, cope with difficult people, talk about our faith to our friends, heal sick people, and take control of the out of control areas of our lives. It's the same Easter power. The same resurrection power. It's the same Jesus.

What do you do after Easter? You expect that wherever you are, Jesus is going to show up. Probably when you least expect it. Maybe when you are tired and grumpy, and perhaps a little disillusioned. If you look out for him, you will see Him working more resurrection miracles. Watch for him and see what happens.