

Text: Acts 2.36-47
St Stephen's

April 3&4, 2010
Easter Weekend

The Resurrection Road to Changed Lives

Did you know that Easter is not a holiday for religious people? If you're not a particularly religious person, if you rarely go to church, congratulations. This is your holiday! That's because Jesus did not come into the world for the sake of religious people. Jesus said,

"I'm here inviting outsiders not insiders - an invitation to a changed life, changed inside and out."

Luke 5:32 (Msg)

We talk a lot about **changed lives** at St Stephens. But lives are famously difficult to change. **I'll bet there is a lot you would like to change about your life...** You are only using a fraction of your God-given potential. (☺ Experts tell us that we only use 10% of the capacity of our brains. Just think what we would be like if we used the other 60%!!!)

Everyone has a sense that they were made for something more. Today I want to walk with you down **the road to change** – it's a **resurrection road** - and invite you to come along. The first thing you have to do if you want to get on this road is to...

1) Open Up To The Reality Of God

"Many are far away from the life of God because they have shut their minds against Him, so they can't understand His ways."

Eph. 4:18 (LB)

Many **people think they are open-minded today. But they are not.** Try this: Walk into a party and tell people to be quiet so that you could read a passage of the bible, and watch what they do!! Just watch them freeze.

Paul wrote, *"Many are far away from the life of God. They have shut*

their minds against Him. They can't understand His ways." Sometimes the reason you don't understand God is because **you've closed your mind** to Him and until you open up to the reality of God there's not going to be any real lasting change in your life. Today would be a good day to open up.

What causes us to close up to the reality of Jesus?

Doubts can close you up. Did you know that of **Jesus' closest followers** every single one of them thought it was over after Friday. They knew he was dead. They had no doubts about that. No one expected the resurrection. Their minds were closed. When the women told them his body was gone on Sunday morning, they thought someone stole it. They went to check it out.

They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them.

Luke 24:2-4

When walked into the empty tomb, they began to think again - they "*wondered*"... It is a good think to rethink, to wonder... When they ran into a couple of mysterious figures who told them he was risen, they **thought more** about it... later in the day, when he appeared to them, they knew for sure, they believed. That was **the turning point** for their lives.

They **went from honest doubt to real faith** because they were willing to **look at the evidence**. Healthy doubt will look at the evidence, because you want to know the truth. If you are **not willing** to look at the evidence, then **something else is probably going on**.

Hurt can cause you to close your mind to God. If you've ever been hurt by a "Christian" or so-called religious person, if you've

ever been hurt in a church, the **typical reaction** is, "If that's what God's people do, forget it!" If you get hurt by other people you close up to God. Mary Magdelin was hurt by religious people – but instead of running away from Jesus, she ran to him!

If you've been hurt in a church, **I want in the name of God to ask your forgiveness today...** Please. In Christ's name, I ask your forgiveness.

Fear "I'm afraid if I open my mind to God, He will turn me into some religious nut case. And I'll become a fanatic and I won't be normal anymore. I'll just be goofy! Well, you will change. But his promise is that when you lose yourself, you will find your true self, your new self. And you will be **profoundly grateful** for the change.

Here is another bend along the road to change...

2) Open Up To The Problem Of You

Can I spend a moment and **introduce you to yourself** ? (I'm on real thin ice here!) Philosophy Prof Greg Ten Elshof begins his 2009 book, **"I Told Me So"** with a personal thought,

"I'm a college professor – I have been for almost a decade. I work reasonably hard at my job, and I think I do it fairly well. In fact, in my honest and solitary moments, I'd say that I am a better than average teacher.

I'm in good company. A recent study revealed the 94% of [us] think they are doing a better than average job. 'A survey of 1,000,000 high school seniors found that 70% thought they were above average in leadership ability, and only 2% thought they were below average. In terms of ability to get along with others, all students thought they were above average, 60% thought they were in the top 10% and 25% thought they were in the top 1%!' Clearly, a lot of people are wrong about how they stack up in comparison with others. Fortunately, I'm not one of them. Am I?"

Well, actually, most of us are.

This is the last sentence in **Peter's first sermon** after Jesus resurrection. It is **an odd sentence**:

He exhorted them, saying, "Save yourselves from this crooked generation." Acts 2:40

We don't speak like that anymore, and it sounds old-fashioned... Let me explain. **Your 'generation' is the matrix of your culture and your city and your family and your personal chemistry and your own character. Your 'generation' forms you.** It did me.

Americans live in a multi-cultural post-modern secular society, and that says a lot about us. Tim Keller describes our generation like this:

'The root idea of modernity is the overturning of all authority outside of the self.'

If you grow up in a 'generation' like this, you believe that 'my choices', 'my opinions', 'my values', 'my desires' are **the fundamental matrix of reality**, and that 'my happiness' is the highest goal of my life. **This is the religion of 'me'**. We make our experience our god, our opinions are our bible, our wishes are our prayers, our credit cards are our answered prayers, our pleasures are our Communion table, and our choices are written on stone tablets.

Here is the problem. **It doesn't work.** It doesn't work **because it is not true. It's 'crooked'**. It vastly overestimates human competence, and underestimates human brokenness. The 'religion of me' **erodes** marriage and family, workplace and career, communities and civic life until we no longer find them stable or dependable. People become **fractured**, ('cracked', 'crooked') and jump from commitment to commitment, from loyalty to loyalty – depending on how they feel. It is a painful way to live.

Maybe we are **not so free** as we hope, **not so strong** as we think, **not so smart** as we make out. Maybe instead of being free men and

women, we are more honestly **captive** men and women.

- Just ask the smoker who is trying to kick the habit.
- Ask the bitter man about his unforgiveness.
- Ask the shopaholic about how much is enough.

This is why so many of the **promises of the Bible** pick up language about **blind** men seeing, and **poor** men feasting, about **lepers** being cleansed, **captives** being set free, and **dead people** coming to life!!. These people are **you and me!** Aren't they? Aren't we?

Peter says, if you live in a crooked generation -

"Get out while you can; get out of this sick and stupid culture!"

Acts 2:40 (Msg)

He's got a point, doesn't he? Wouldn't you like to **get past you?** You can. **Because God is real.** And ever since the death and resurrection of Jesus **the problem of me doesn't have to be the end of the road.** Not anymore.

3) Open Up To The Life Of Jesus

This is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.

Jesus in John 17.3

When Jesus says '*knowing*' – he is talking about a dependent, intimate, interactive partnership with him. Like a husband knows a wife and a wife knows a husband. We'll come back to this.

Over my 30 years as a pastor I have watched hundreds of people walk down the road of change promised by the gospel. Today we are talking honestly about some of the most **difficult parts of that journey:** a mind that is closed to God and a heart that is blind to my own brokenness. There is a third difficulty that I want to mention today. It is the **difficulty of a little gospel.** Here is what I mean.

Most of us think of faith as a **one-time affair.** You make a decision to

come to Christ, you are forgiven, and that's it. You have had your ticket punched. You're good! Set for eternity!

Here is the gospel we come to believe:

- **Christ's Forgiveness for our Past,**
- **Christ's Eternity for our Future**

This is what I call '**the little gospel**', and it is a dead end to a changed life. Don't get me wrong. It is certainly true as far as it goes, but look at it carefully for a moment. Do you notice **what it leaves out?** **Today.** And every today God gives you. It has nothing to say about your todays. And God has a great deal to say about your todays. So this is not the gospel of the NT, at least not all of it.

It is what one theologian calls (and it is a crass phrase, so take a breath) '**vampire Christianity**'. The kind of Christianity that **says to Jesus**, 'I want **a little of your blood** to take care of my past and secure my future – but I don't have much interest in you for my today's, certainly not a dependent, intimate, interactive partnership with you. I'd like to manage those myself...' And then we **go back to the 'religion of me'**. And you don't change, won't change.

The gospel of the NT is something **far larger**; it would be better charted like this:

- **Christ's Forgiveness for our Past**
- **Christ's Life for our Today's**
- **Christ's Eternity for our Future**

It includes your past, your future, AND your today's, all swept up by the mercy of Jesus, all filled with the life of Jesus. He says '**knowing him, like this is eternal life!** Nothing is left out. No hope or dream, no relationship, no possession, no job or career, no thought or action, no sin or failure, no matter of character or attitude of life – they are all swept up under his mercy, all infected by His Life, all lived in his presence!

Interested? In a 'Fresh Start'? Or a 'First Start'? That can happen today. Because **the road to change** – is **a resurrection road** - and it is the Risen Lord Jesus himself who invites you to come along.