

Sermon: Our Words Matter

Wesley Methodist Church 75 Taranaki Street
10am Congregation

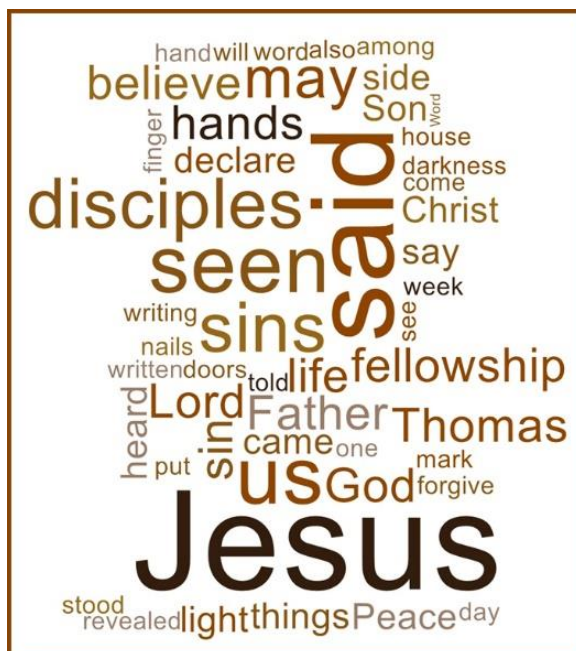
11 April 2021 Easter 2

Preacher: Philip Garside

Readings:

1 John 1:1-2:2

John 20:18-31



(Word cloud based on the NRSV Bible readings)

Sermon: Our Words Matter

“Mary Magdalene went and **announced** to the disciples, ‘I have seen the Lord;’ and she **told** them that he had **said** these things to her.”

Let’s pray: May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts and minds, be acceptable to you O God, our strength and our liberator. Amen.

I have titled this sermon, Our Words Matter, Our Words Matter.

Today’s Bible readings both record things that people said about Jesus. They are almost like dialogue in a play. The emphasis is on what people say and write:

- We **declare** to you what was from the beginning,
- we have seen it and **testify** to it
- we **declare** to you what we have seen and heard
- This is the message we have heard from him and **proclaim** to you
- If we **say** that we have no sin,
- If we **confess** our sins
- Mary Magdalene went and **announced** to the disciples, ‘I have seen the Lord’
- Jesus came and stood among them and **said**, ‘Peace be with you.’
- he breathed on them and **said** to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit

The key verbs are **declare, testify, proclaim, say, confess, announced, said.**

What we say is important. Our words can encourage people or damage them.

I have been reading a 2012 book by Lois Tverberg titled *Walking in the Dust of Rabbi Jesus*.¹ In it she relates this story.

A story is told of a habitual gossip who finally decided to repent of his sin. He knocked on the door of the village rabbi and asked, “Is there something I can do to make amends?” The rabbi stroked his beard and replied, “Go home and come back with a pillow.” Relieved, the man soon completed the odd errand. Would such a simple gift be all that was needed to atone for this sin? When he returned, the rabbi continued. “Now, slice it open.” It was a windy day, and the breeze picked up the

1 Tverberg, Lois. *Walking in the Dust of Rabbi Jesus* (p. 133). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

feathers, wafting them over the housetops and into the fields. “Now, go gather all of the feathers again and put them back in the pillow.” “But that’s impossible!” exclaimed the man. “In the same way, it’s impossible to repair all the damage that your words have done.”

And another caution from her book:

Why did commentaries by the rabbis, (as well as the Letter of James), go to such lengths to declare the potential for the wickedness of our tongues? Because nothing except our own vigilance is stopping us from uttering words that will wound loved ones and shatter our dearest relationships. Once a word exits our lips, we can’t get it back. Furthermore, now that a few strokes of a keyboard will broadcast our thoughts across the planet in the blink of an eye, it is even more critical to consider wisely each word we use. Not only do our words go much farther, they last much longer.

The story and season of Easter is an important time for Christians. Easter challenges us respond to the way in which Jesus died – on a cross – and to his coming back to life – in his resurrection. Tied up with this is the Christian concept that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine. And we need to wrestle with the issue of whether God intended that Jesus should die to atone for our sins, or should we focus more on the examples of what Jesus said and did when he was alive. Is the post-Easter, divine, risen, Jesus more important than the pre-Easter human, rabbi and healer Jesus?

If I had to state a black or white answer to these issues, I would say that Jesus was a man and not divine, his teaching during his life is more important than whether or not he rose from the tomb, and that he didn’t die to atone for our sins, but because the Romans thought he was a political threat. This is a typical, rational, Western way to look at life. Study the issues carefully, do the background reading necessary to make an informed judgement and then make a firm decision, one way or the other. No sitting on the fence.

In her book Lois Tverberg sets out an alternative, Jewish, approach to deep issues like interpreting the Easter story.

The Bible has many contradictions or paradoxes. For example:

- Exodus states that “no one can see God and live” — yet only a few chapters later, the seventy elders of Israel saw God on Mount Sinai (Exodus 24:9; 33:20) – and lived to tell the tale.

- Jesus said, “anyone who wants to be first must be the very last” (Mark 9:35), and
- “anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (John 12:25).

Or take the idea that, “Everything is under God’s control, yet people have free will.” Well, which is correct?

The Jewish approach, going back more than 2,000 years, is to weigh both sides of a question one at a time. A Jewish person might say, on the one hand [indicate with left hand] God created the world and knows what has been and what will happen in the future. Then they would say, on the other hand [indicate with right hand] God didn’t choose which route I drove to church this morning, or what groceries I bought at the supermarket, or who I married. The objective of a discussion like this is to explore the alternatives, the pros and cons of each position, to dig deeper.

At the end of a discussion, the participants will be well satisfied if they feel that they have found a new insight or two about the scripture text or theological issue. They didn’t expect to come to, or even want, a definitive answer. Neither position is wrong or right. It is enough to know that they gained a deeper understanding and that they can come back and explore the issue again at another time. There is value and pleasure in just meeting and talking.

This is a new concept for me and I really like it. I think it helps us to know that this is the cultural approach or custom that Jesus would have grown up in. He would have been familiar with this, style of looking at both sides of a text, story or situation.

For us it might be enough for today, to just feel the tension in the Christian idea that Jesus was fully human **and** fully divine. We don’t have to decide whether he was or wasn’t.

We can think about the ways in which Jesus was human like us. He liked good food and partying. He wept when he looked down on Jerusalem. He got testy with his disciples when they still couldn’t grasp his vision of the kingdom of God. He liked and respected women and children. His family thought he was nuts at times.

But Jesus healed people in miraculous ways that medical science can’t explain. Jesus brought Lazarus back from the dead four days later. The reason for stating

four days in the story is to avoid any suggestion that Lazarus was just sleeping or in a coma and woke up naturally. After four days he was well and truly dead, so Jesus had performed a miracle.

Jesus restored sight to many blind people, sometimes without even touching them. Mary Magdalene and his other disciples thought that he had risen from the tomb. They told the story of him coming back to see them soon after, and of Thomas not believing them at first, but changing his mind when Jesus appeared next time. The disciples see Jesus rise into the sky at Ascension.

To paraphrase another commentator in Lois' book:

If I focus on Jesus as human, I miss Jesus as God. If I focus on Jesus as God, I miss Jesus as human. Is he God or is he just a human? As with all paradoxes of the Bible, the answer is “yes.” **And “yes.”**

Marcus Borg² suggests in his book *Evolution of the Word* that the letter 1 John was not written by the apostle John, nor by an eyewitness to Jesus' life, nor by the writer of the Gospel of John. It was probably written around the year 100, 70 years after Jesus died. This letter was likely to have been written by a member of a Christian community that followed the teachings of the writer of the gospel of John. John's Gospel was written around the year 90, 60 years after Jesus died.

The letter has similar themes to the gospel:

- Light and darkness
- Word and incarnation (incarnation is the idea that God became human, like us, in the man Jesus)
- Eternal life
- “Love one another” and “God is love.”

Let's look at the sections of the readings, which the NRSV translation helpfully provides sub-headings for.

The Word of Life. John's Gospel begins with, “IN THE beginning was the Word, and the Word was **with** God, and the Word **was** God.” The Greek term for word is *logos*, which means idea. So, in the beginning was the *logos*, the idea of God. The gospel goes on to make clear that this idea or *logos* was Jesus,

² Borg, Marcus J. *Evolution of the Word: The New Testament in the Order the Books Were Written*. HarperCollins. Kindle Edition 2012.

who **was** God, but also **with** God. This is another paradox. Was Jesus bound up with, and of the same substance as God from the beginning of time, or does “**with** God” mean that Jesus was a bit separate from, and only side-by-side with God?

The Council of Nicea in 325 AD was called by the Roman emperor Constantine. He gathered bishops of Christian churches from around the empire to decide once and for all the question about Jesus’ relationship to God, and some other matters. Constantine wanted to make Christianity the state religion of the Roman empire, but first needed the bishops to agree on this important theological issue, so that there would be a consensus throughout the church. The council voted, with only two dissenting voices, that Jesus **was** of the same substance as God. And that should have been that. But the consensus soon broke down in churches around the empire, and believers once again had to decide for themselves between the two options. They were obliged to keep hold of both these ideas at the same time, in tension with each other. How very Jewish.

John’s letter invites us to gather with other people in fellowship with the Father, and with his Son, Jesus Christ. That early Christian community’s joy will be complete when they have written the letter and distributed it to other communities. Isn’t that lovely, their joy will be complete when they have told other people the Good News about Jesus. In his sermon last week our Superintendent, Rev Simote Taunga, challenged us to make the Good News of Jesus Christ known to others outside the church.

God Is Light. The candles which we light at the start of our services remind us of this. The letter writer’s message is that if we speak the truth about our sins or shortcomings, and are honest with each other when we gather for worship, then we reflect God’s light, and the burden of sin will be lifted from us. But if we pretend that we never do anything wrong, we make a liar out of Jesus, and will live in darkness.

Christ Our Advocate. Here is support for the idea that Jesus did die to atone for our sins and that he opens a way to living a life unburdened by sin.

Turning to the gospel reading, Mary Magdalene is the first person to recognise that Jesus has risen, even before the male disciples. The gospel writers all acknowledge that she was an important leader within the group of men and women who followed and supported Jesus in his ministry and travels. Her words are good news: “I have seen the Lord!”

Jesus Appears to the Disciples: These verses serve as a proof that Mary Magdalene was right. The men are hiding indoors. They fled when Jesus was crucified. (Only the women stayed with him then.) The men were still scared of being discovered, not by the Romans, but by their fellow Jews. The temple authorities perhaps? Then he appears and the men are convinced that Jesus is back with them. Jesus brings them three gifts; peace, the Holy Spirit and the authority to forgive sins. There is an echo here of the Spirit coming at Pentecost, which is told in the book of Acts.

Thomas gets a hard time in this gospel. But I think we can identify with his stance. He would like to believe what the other men have told him but would really like some proof that Jesus has returned. He is known to us as Doubting Thomas. But this is an example of us being happy to hear someone called a derogatory name, that demeans him. **Honest** Thomas would be a more fitting label.

The Purpose of This Book. It is likely that the gospel originally finished at the end of chapter 20. "...these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name." This is a good summary of the message, of the Good News.

Chapter 21 dealing with Jesus appearing to the disciples on the shores of Lake Galilee, was probably added to the gospel later.

Which parts of today's Bible readings, or the extracts from Lois' book, do you feel drawn to?

What feels like an important message for you in your daily life?

Which words matter to you?

What will you share with other people?

Remember, Our Words Matter.

Amen.

You can contact Philip by email to: books@pgpl.co.nz