

**What if Jesus didn't die?****Leviticus 16:1-22, Romans 3:21-31**

I've always been a student of history.

It was my favourite subject at school,

I studied history at university.

I love museums and historic places.

Within the study of history there is what you might call a fringe interest  
where some people ask the question "what if an event didn't happen?"

Its called *alternative history*, and it really exercises your imagination.

What if the result of WWII went the other way?

Some people imagine that a huge naval battle would have taken place  
in the Atlantic between the United States and the Nazis. Scary stuff.

What if the British had won the War of Independence against the Americans?

Would they have then bothered  
to turn their attention to the southern hemisphere?  
Would Australia be the country that we know today?

What if they went with a different design for the harbor bridge?

Here's something that we could have had, a bit like the Golden Gate Bridge,  
Or what about this monstrosity?  
A massive roundabout on Goat Island with three arms sticking out of it!

What if they went with a different design for the Opera House?

Here's the third place getter. How exiting is that!  
Second place-getter isn't bad ...  
but I'm glad they went with what they did, aren't you?

History could have very easily been so different,  
and it's a fun exercise to imagine the alternatives.

Now this weekend we are meeting together  
to remember what I consider to be the most important weekend in history:  
Christ's death on Good Friday and his resurrection on Easter Day.

What if those two events didn't happen?

What if Christ lived a long life  
and died comfortably in a villa on the Mediterranean?  
What if he did die on a cross but remained in the tomb forever?

This is the question that we are asking this morning and on Sunday,  
beginning this morning by thinking about the alternative to Good Friday;

a Friday when Jesus didn't die on the cross.  
Would it have made any difference if Jesus hadn't died?

Well, as I see it there would be at least three consequences if Jesus didn't die.  
You might be able to think of more but I've come up with three/  
First of all, *God would be a liar!*

When Jesus first started speaking about his pending death on the cross,  
his followers had trouble accepting what it was he was saying.  
"No no" they would say, "you're not heading towards death,  
you're heading towards victory and influence and power!"  
But Jesus was adamant: The son of man (a name that he used for himself) *must*  
suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law,  
and he *must* be killed and after three days rise again.  
He must be killed, and he must be killed in a particular way!

Now why is Jesus so insistent on this rather gruesome outcome?  
Because this was something that had been prophesied in the OT  
It was something that God had promised  
as he spoke through the OT prophets.  
Isaiah spoke about a servant figure  
who would be *pierced* for our transgressions  
and how it would be by his *wounds* that we would be healed.  
Zechariah also spoke about one who would be *pierced*  
before a great fountain of spiritual cleansing would be opened up.

This is one reason why Jesus couldn't just pass away gently under a tree.  
Why did it have to be so gruesome?  
I think this is part of the reason; it was *promised* that it would be this way.  
The cross was in fulfillment of what the Holy Spirit had predicted.

You know, one of the reasons we exist as a church  
is to convince people to put their trust in the God we worship.  
You can't trust someone who sets an expectation but doesn't deliver.  
Good Friday demonstrates a consistency within the Biblical story,  
a consistency assuring us that God is trustworthy.

Another place where the Holy Spirit predicted the cross  
was back when he laid out the sacrificial system for the Ancient Israelites.  
Our first reading was from the very intimidating OT book of Leviticus:  
A book full of ancient laws in a lots of detail, much of it quite gruesome.

The passage we heard, Leviticus ch 16,  
explains what would happen on the Day of Atonement.  
This was a day devised by God to address a problem.  
We hear about the problem in the opening verses, Lev ch 16 vs 1:

The LORD spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron who died when they approached the LORD. <sup>2</sup> The LORD said to Moses: “Tell your brother Aaron that he is not to come whenever he chooses into the Most Holy Place behind the curtain in front of the atonement cover on the ark, or else he will die. For I will appear in the cloud over the atonement cover.

This is the problem: God is holy and perfect, and humans are sinful and imperfect,  
and so the two cannot meet together  
without God's holiness wiping out everything.  
You can't put round-up on buffalo grass, without the grass being destroyed  
You can't leave a bag of hot chips unattended at the beach,  
without the seagulls devouring it.  
And you can't leave sinful humans in the presence of a Holy God  
because there will be nothing left.

So God himself does something about it!  
He presents a system that was all about atoning for human sin,  
—a system where human sin could be compensated for—  
so that people could come close to God and not only live to tell the tale,  
but actually enjoy his presence.

And so the high point of this system was the Day of Atonement when Aaron and the priests who would follow in the years after him would spill the blood of a bull, a ram and a goat to atone for the nation's sins.

What was significant about spilling blood?  
It signified that the death brought about by human sin was being transferred onto another carrier, instead of Aaron and all Israel dying in God's presence, their sin was transferred onto the animals, and the animals died instead. And so in this way the sins of ancient Israel were taken care of.

But there was just one more problem.  
 Could the death of animals really compensate for the sin of humans?  
 I mean *really*?

Sometimes when my car is being fixed,  
and the mechanic lends me a courtesy car, it's not really the same standard.  
I used to have a mechanic friend who was a Porsche specialist.  
And he very graciously offered to service my car  
and so I used to take my Toyota to the Porsche mechanic.  
He had a whole fleet of courtesy cars for his valued customers.  
I never got a Porsche. He'd hand me the keys to a Mazda 121;  
It was like a sardine can! A backwards step, even from the humble Toyota!

That's what the OT system was like.

It never really provided adequate compensation for human sin,  
it was only ever designed to be a temporary arrangement.

We see this in the opening verses of our NT reading.

Paul is writing to the Romans and he says in ch 3:21

But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known,  
to which the Law and the Prophets testify.

It wasn't just prophets like Isaiah and Zechariah  
who testified about what was to come.

The Law itself, with all its talk of animal sacrifice,  
The law was also pointing to something in the future.

In the future blood would have to be spilt again.

God had promised that human sin would be atoned for,  
and so if animal blood wasn't quite up to the task,  
and if God's was going to be faithful and not a liar  
then he had to provide a more effective kind of blood from somewhere else.

And so Jesus comes onto the scene so that *his* blood could be spilt.

Verse 25 God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his  
blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his  
forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished.

And so, in order to demonstrate that he is true to his word,  
in order to finally provide the atonement that the OT sacrifices alluded to,  
God presented Christ to provide the blood that atones for sin.

Isn't it good when you find a cleaning product that works?

I once pulled one of those energy ratings stickers off a new fridge  
and the sticky residue just wouldn't shift.

Soapy water didn't work, Spray and Wipe didn't work.

It was WD40 that did the trick.

Christ's blood does the trick. As the title of this book says: *His Blood Works*.

And even though they were sacrificing animals,

it was still the blood of Christ that saved the OT Israelites

The OT system was just a temporary pathway for the Israelites to use.

When City Rail does track-work you have to hop on a transit bus,  
don't you hate that?

In the end you get to the same destination but it's not the most efficient route.

That's the OT law. Same destination, different route.

These days we access Christ's atonement directly by faith, that what Paul teaches us.

We place our trust, our belief, our hope, our faith in Jesus,  
and his blood wipes away our sin. No ritual is needed, just belief and trust.

It's a bit like when you place your trust in an expert surgeon.

I recently caught up with the minister over at St John's Asquith,  
Brian Heath, some of you might know him.  
He told me that earlier this year he came off his bike  
and was so cut up that he needed to have plastic surgery on his face.  
When someone tells you they've had plastic surgery you can't help but look!  
I said "They've done a good job, I wouldn't have known without you telling me!"  
His faith in his doctor's skill was rewarded.

and likewise our faith in Christ's blood will be rewarded.  
His blood *will* atone for sin, and so when, in the life to come,  
we find ourselves standing in the presence of a holy God,  
we will have nothing to fear.  
That wouldn't be possible if Jesus didn't die.  
Because he's kept his word,  
God ensures atonement for sin is available  
for those willing to trust him.

And by keeping his word God also shows us what real love looks like.  
If Jesus didn't die we'd be without a significant model of genuine love.  
As Paul says a little later on in Romans, in Ch 5 v8  
God demonstrates his own love for us in this:  
While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

How does the world we live in teach us about love?  
Let's take two of our most popular TV programs:  
*The Bachelor*, and *Married at First Sight*.

The tag line for *The Bachelor* is, or has been, "watch love happen".  
And that is the attraction for many with that show,  
people like to watch people fall in love.  
And what is the formula for falling in love?  
A bit of physical attraction, a bit of compatibility, willingness to be open.  
All of these are good and important things! But what about self-sacrifice?  
Sometimes the contestants are willing to move interstate, so that's good,  
but it's not always the case.

The model of love that Easter leaves us has self-sacrifice right at the centre,  
it's the first thing we talk about, it's the first measure of love.

The attraction of MAFS is a little different,  
you know when you're driving past a road accident and you slow down?  
Like when someone admits to plastic surgery, you automatically look!  
That's what MAFS is like.  
The vast majority of these relationships end in disaster and we're looking on.  
Self-sacrifice and faithfulness is the last thing on some contestant's minds,  
And the cost is horrific.

Jesus shows us different model: when we were in need, he was willing to die.

It's a love that our word is crying out for.

Next week we'll continue our series in the Book of Proverbs  
and there are a couple of Proverbs telling us about what people really desire:  
What a person desires is unfailing love we're told in Proverbs 19:22  
Many claim to have unfailing love, Ch 20:6 explains, but a faithful person who can find?  
And you see it in some of these TV shows.  
When the contestants swap wives or husbands the pain is palpable.  
Faithfulness has a cost, and that cost is self-sacrifice,  
the ability to say *no* to yourself in order to say an ongoing *yes* to another.  
Through his death Jesus shows us what that looks like,  
and we wouldn't have that example if he didn't die.

You know a couple of years ago a scientist worked out a way of determining  
the most boring day in history.

He crunched all this data about significant events  
and famous birthdays and when famous people died.  
He put it all into a computer and the computer spat out one date  
as being of lesser significance than all the others.  
(I apologize in advance if anyone here was born on this date:  
you are very significant no matter what some scientist says!)  
The date was Sunday, April 11, 1954.

Now if this scientist is correct, then of all the days in history,  
perhaps that could be the one that is most easily overlooked.

If there was an opposite to that day,  
—a day that would be the *most* significant—  
then the first Good Friday and the first Easter Day  
would have to be the front runners.  
Because if those events didn't happen,  
God would be a liar,  
humans would still be in their sins,  
and true love wouldn't find its true model.

That's why we call it Good Friday.

I'll lead us in prayer.