

Easter Day 2020: **Matthew 28.1-10**, Acts 10.34-43, The Revd Canon Patrick Curran

Each and every Christian celebration of Easter, which is a celebration of our Christian faith, is characterised by our affirmation of Christ's resurrection from the dead. Christ overcomes death, conquers death, vanquishes death and goes before us showing us the way that leads to the fullness of life today as he did on that first Easter morn. What does the angel instruct the women to do? They are to go to the disciples and tell them that he the Risen Christ is going before them to Galilee and there the disciples will meet him!

Each and every Christian celebration of Easter, which is a celebration of our faith, is always rooted in the here and now. There is a beautiful passage in a book entitled *The Shape of the Liturgy* by Gregory Dix that lists the occasions on which the Lord's Supper, the Holy Eucharist, the Holy Communion was celebrated at coronations and at times of famine and pestilence to name a few of the occasions listed in that beautiful passage. If I were a poet, then I would draw up a similar list.

Instead I will tell you about an article that appeared in the notorious German newspaper *Die Bildzeitung* on the occasion of my mother's 100th birthday in March. *Die Bildzeitung* is the equivalent of the *Kronezeitung* in Austria or of the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Mirror* in the United Kingdom. My mother's carer Beata thinking my mother's extraordinary life should be marked publicly in some way contacted the *Bildzeitung*, unbeknown to any of us I want you to know. We ended up with the screaming headline, "Corona macht mir mehr Angst als der Krieg!" "Corona causes me more fear than the war!" Six years of armed conflict that turned into a World War, preceded by six years of Nazi Germany and succeeded by years of austerity and occupation.

Suffice it perhaps to say that each and every person who enters my mother's flat could be Covid-19 infected and therefore poses a threat to her. Is a cause for fear, if my mother were so disposed. And what causes fear is not what we have survived or faced down in the past, but that which we have to face today at this moment. Many are fearful of contracting the Covid-19 virus, others are fearful for their livelihoods and others have reached and are reaching their limits being confined to their homes. Too often it is not the size of the accommodation that matters, but how one interacts with one another – unresolved issues, past failures, disappointments, unfulfilled ambitions and dreams come to the fore.

This year we celebrate Easter against the backdrop of the Covid-19 virus rightly concerned as well about the local Austrian and wider European and global economy. Thankful that the Austrian government in partnership with the society of which it is a part and of which we are a part are seemingly managing the crisis well. Other ongoing concerns have taken second place for the time being such as climate change, the war in Syria, refugees on the borders to Greece and ongoing concerns for the eastern African countries who experienced swarms of locusts wreaking devastation, to name a few.

Concerning the ever present issue of and concern for refugees that won't go away even if we stick our heads in the sand someone painted this slogan on the entrance to the Stadtpark, the oldest public gardens in Vienna: "Überfüllte Lager - Leere Hotels - Geht's noch." "Bursting camps - empty hotels - go figure." The element the slogan transports cannot be denied, but it might be, to use another German phrase, too kurzgedacht. Shortsighted might be a suitable translation?

Today we celebrate Christ's resurrection from the dead, juxtaposed against the aforementioned crises and it is not all doom and gloom. People have been reaching out to each other. So far I had

no need to call on the freely offered services of more than fifteen people who came forward to say that they could help with shopping and run errands for those who are confined to their homes and those who are housebound. People have been looking out for each other. My mother made 100. She has a carer who cares for her and goes the extra mile.

Professionals and labourers/workers in less prestigious occupations have been putting their lives at risk. Because they understand that we are called to be servants to one another, that we all must at times risk something of ourselves in the service of others. No one to my mind is exempt. The Christian message has had a directing hand over the centuries in helping to form this response whether acknowledged or not. The vulnerable, the outsider, the stranger in our midst have value. The handicapped, the aged, the unborn have intrinsic value.

Our fourteen months old grandson has been living with us during the crisis. We have seen him move from his first halting steps to being an accomplished toddler! What a joy to watch. As a family we have gathered most evenings for a Bible reading and a few prayers. Jesus' teaching about children was in one of our readings, where Jesus takes a child, places him in the middle and says to the disciples and the crowds that you must become like these, which we might term recovering innocence.

Today Christians around the world are rejoicing in Christ's resurrection from the dead, that sign by which we are assured that death and sin have been overcome, conquered and vanquished. In Matthew's account of the resurrection it is clear that when the two Marys arrive (it is assumed that the second Mary is the mother of Jesus) the resurrection has already happened. "The stone has been rolled away not to let Jesus out, but to let the witnesses in."

Matthew's account of the first resurrection appearance can speak to us forcefully about the way of faith that we are to go with the two Marys. The verb go is the operative word in the account. "Then go quickly and tell the disciples!" Tell the disciples that Jesus is going before you! And he can go before them because he has been raised. The women go as instructed. They have seen. They have believed. The stone of disbelief has been rolled away. They are both ready to hear and to act. And to my mind this is the most significant thing that takes place, something that we can overlook so easily because we are still wondering in the words of Nicodemus "How can this be?" Or we are asking ourselves questions like, How can the tomb be empty? How can someone be raised from the dead?

The significant moment is when the women act. The women go. The women go away from the empty tomb with a message. They do not leave empty handed. And it is in this setting out, it is in this going forward that they encounter Jesus. They encounter him on the way in the living-out of their newborn faith. They are not tied up in questions, wondering, second guessing, instead they act. They go. They encounter. You might retort, but they have the message of the angel. What does this resurrection angel stand for? The angel stands for the voice of God a voice ever active. God spoke and it was so. The opening to the Letter to the Hebrews makes it clear! "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds." (Hebrews 1.1-2)

Why don't I meet Jesus? Why don't I meet God? Is it possible that we don't set out with a message? The message the women will bring to the disciples, the message they act on, is to tell the disciples, "He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee;

there you will see him.” (Mt. 28.7) Why Galilee? One reference in Matthew’s Gospel affords the answer: Galilee of the Gentiles. (Mt 4.15) Galilee was not only a region inhabited by Jews, but it was also populated with Gentiles.

In the Gospels we encounter Jesus mainly ministering in the Galilee of the Jews, but now the message is to be shared with the Gentiles as well. Matthew has been leading his readers to this moment since the Magi set out to follow a star, best known to us as the wise men from a country afar to pay homage to the newborn king Jesus (meaning God saves) to bring their gifts of gold, incense and myrrh. Matthew will conclude the Gospel with what is called the Great Commission, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Today we join with Christians the world over in celebrating and rejoicing and even shouting from the rooftops that Jesus has been raised from the dead. We too meet Jesus on the way, as we live out of and draw on the strength that God supplies, as we go. If I had one wish for you, it would be this: Don’t allow your life of faith to be stunted by the disbeliefs of others, their inaction, their passivity, their comfortableness.

Christians are a people on the way. Wir sind dabei uns aufzumachen! And on the way we encounter God, who is our life, who is our sure refuge, our rod and our staff, knowing that throughout all the changes and challenges that we still must face and all the joys that are still to be ours God is with us. Jesus is not found in the empty tomb, see for your selves, rather God encounters us on the way that we may know that he is with us today. “The stone has been rolled away not to let Jesus out, but to let the witnesses in.” We are your witnesses. Finally how does God in Jesus meet the women, the two Marys! What is his greeting! Our translation has Greetings, but the Greek word is much stronger. In line with the contour of this most holy day he greets them, saying “Be ye rejoicing”! And we are rejoicing. I trust I can see a smile on all your faces? In the infamous words of St Paul, Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. (Philippians 4:4)