

Easter Day, Year C, 2022: Acts 10.34-43, Luke 24.1-12, Easter Anthems

Today Easter Day is a new day unlike any other. It is the beginning of the week. It is the eighth day. The strife is over. The battle done. It is finished. The powers of death have done their worst. And Jesus hath his foes dispersed. Let shouts of praise and joy outburst! Alleluia! Praise the Lord!

Christians are those who live this side of the crucifixion meaning we are those who put their trust in God that sin is redeemed, the price paid and the final enemy death has been overcome by Christ's resurrection from the dead. Death does not have the last word. Paul even mocks death! Death where is now thy sting? Death where is now thy victory? (1 Corinthians 15:55) Christians are those who live this side of the crucifixion. We are those for whom the resurrection is real, because he has been raised from the dead. We are those for whom the resurrection is the defining reality not losing sight of his birth, earthly life, public ministry, passion, death and the giving of the Holy Spirit, so that we do not lose ourselves in abstractions. For us the resurrection is no idle tale picking up on some words that describe the disciples' reaction to what Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women tell them.

This word idle has been translated as nonsense, in an Arabic version predating Islam as *jest* in our modern idiom, "You must be joking!" In an early Persian version as dream. In Luther's, the 16th century Reformer, translation as Mär, fairy tale, but also as a feigned thing, deception or delusion. For us Christ's resurrection is no idle tale. Bishop Geoffrey Rowell, the former bishop of our diocese, would begin interviews with candidates applying for chaplain's posts within the diocese with a question about the resurrection, because it is a touchstone of our faith. It is central to our identity as Christians. And for us to remind ourselves of our identity as Christians in the confusions about identity at this time is paramount. Some words of St Paul's in his first letter to the church in Thessaloniki help us here, when he writes that we do not mourn as others do, who have no hope. (1 Thessalonians 4.13)

Let us rewind a little and go with the women to the tomb early in the morning on the 16th day of the month of Nisan, in the year 3793 according to the Hebrew calendar, which according to our calendar is Sunday 5 April, 33 AD, anno domini, in the year of the Lord. They set out at the break of dawn approximately 6.30 a.m. We are not sure of the year so this dating is being given to help us build a picture for ourselves. (((I even tried to work out the average morning temperature that day... but gave up.))) These women set out, we can't say how many, but there are more than named in the narrative. It is evident that they are mourning. They go without expectancy. They go to complete the burial rituals for their beloved master, their Rabbouni. They take with them the spices they have prepared. Their desire is to honour him.

Each time I tried to write this sermon, for Easter Day 2022, this is the third attempt, the same question crossed my mind. Without the resurrection and then the giving of the Holy Spirit as Luke narrates in the Acts of the Apostles what aspects of Jesus' ministry and teaching would have

continued to live on in those who followed him unaided by the resurrection faith that is ours and sustained by the Holy Spirit. What would have remained, endured? There are, it is true, a number of things we can treasure without the assurance that our resurrection faith provides. Here four examples. I would immediately go to the Sermon on the Mount, "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ... (Matthew 5.43). I might continue with, "Why do you see the speck in your neighbour's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?" (Matthew 7.) I would definitely include "Then Peter came and said to him, 'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy times seven.'" (Matthew 18.21,22) And here another must. Jesus said to his disciples, "For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves." (Luke 22.27) It is worth attending to this question of what might have endured, because it reveals to us something about our faith and what is informing and forming us. It is a way of remembering who we are. It is about our identity as Christians. I will return to the need to remember shortly.

So in our mind's eye we make our way to the tomb with the women without expectancy, but still with love for this man, who called us into fellowship with himself. What an exciting, but more importantly enriching time we had with him. Grateful for the time we had in his presence. Not comprehending how things could go so terribly wrong so quickly. We go with these women to find the stone rolled away and the tomb empty. And with them even today we are perplexed. The empty tomb is perplexing. Its emptiness leaves us puzzled. Is it empty because his body has been taken away as Mary states in John's account, 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.'" (John 20.2) The Empty Tomb points to a message conveyed by two men in dazzling white. They would seem to be angels. Luke suggests so later in his gospel. They certainly are messengers, which is what angel means. But who are these two men – for this is how they appear and are described in the text? It is a question I never asked myself assuming them to be angels.

We must rewind to find an answer. I find myself in Galilee on the Mount of the Transfiguration with Jesus, but significantly for the reading of this passage with Moses and Elijah, representing the Law and the Prophets. In the Empty Tomb these in my reading are chief witnesses to Christ's resurrection. The key is The Law and the Prophets, meaning *what has gone before and points ahead*. What the followers of Jesus seemingly in the grip of amnesia didn't know, but ought to have known so well. The two exclaim "He is risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." The response is that they do remember and remembering they now have a message to share and not a death to mourn.

This is Good News. And naturally returning to the eleven and the rest, possibly 120 persons, they share with them what they have experienced. The response is incredulity. Incredulity is something that is always associated with Thomas, but here we have the first instance of incredulity, of not believing. These words seem to all who heard them an idle tale, a dream, a jest and they did not believe. But one of them makes a move and it is Peter. His reaction is amazement and that of the women was being terrified. Both indicators of divine encounter.

I believe it important in strengthening what I am suggesting about the witness of the Law and the Prophets is to briefly fast forward to the next gospel episode, as it makes the same point. A stranger, who it is revealed towards the end of the episode I am referring, Jesus, joins two disciples as they make their way to a village called Emmaus. This stranger, Jesus, says to them, “‘Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?’ Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.”

Today we are reminded not only of how women, disciples and others witness together with the Law and the Prophets, but also of how the enduring symbol of the Empty Tomb witnesses to Jesus’ death and resurrection. Jesus crucified and risen is not without witnesses. The word that struck me and it is there in both today’s gospel and verses that is the word remember and the need for us to remember and sometimes we will need a jolt as in “Why do you look for the living among the dead?” Or a companion ready and willing to walk with us the extra mile with us in our halting walk of faith reminding us to remember so that we do not lose our identity, our Christian identity that sets us apart. As Christians we need to remember who we are. Likewise the Church needs to remember who she is, lest she exchange the glory of the immortal God for activism and issues, drinking too readily from the waters of this world, instead of the waters that lead to eternal life. Paul writes addressing this matter, “If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.” (1 Corinthians 15:19) This seems to me an urgent message to remember who we are as Christians. In the letter to the Ephesians we read as an example, “... you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God.” (2.19) Easter Day, the day of resurrection, the day he rose from the dead is a defining and central characteristic of who we are as Christians. It is life-inspiring. It is joy-giving. It is energising. We need today in that simple phrase of St Augustine’s to remember that, “We are an Easter people and Alleluia is our song.” I end with a prayer from Common Worship that I use at funerals believing each and every word. Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!

Heavenly Father,
in your Son Jesus Christ
you have given us a true faith and a sure hope.
Strengthen this faith and hope in us all our days,
that we may live as those who believe in
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins
and the resurrection to eternal life;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**