

Easter Day 2024

Acts 10:34-43; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11; John 20:1-18

A few years ago when I was working in a school I was asked to be one of the members of staff on a skiing trip to Austria. Despite the daunting prospect of 2 20 hour coach journeys with 40 13 year old girls and all the accompanying noise and teen movies I jumped at the opportunity of a week skiing. We had a great time – a joy to see beginners progressing from barely being able to stand up on skis to skiing well by the end of the week, together with the steady improvement of those who had skied before. The trip was in the first week of the Easter Holidays, and we returned home on Holy Saturday.

The next day was of course Easter Sunday and as always I went to church. But somehow Easter didn't seem quite right. It took me a while to realise that I was missing something because I hadn't been through Holy Week and Good Friday (there hadn't been much chance to ponder the events of Holy Week whilst supervising on the ski slopes!).

I realised the truth that to experience and celebrate the joy of Easter in its fullness we must first experience the pain and suffering of Holy Week and Good Friday. And that's why we have services and activities each evening throughout Holy Week. We spend time thinking about what happened to Jesus from the joyful entry to Jerusalem which we celebrated last week on Palm Sunday, through the last supper, his arrest and trial and finally the crucifixion. And having experienced the suffering and rejection of Holy Week, today – Easter Day - we can celebrate in joy. You can't have Easter without Good Friday

But it works the other way round too. The story has to finish with Easter Sunday. If it stopped on Good Friday where would that leave us? The death of an itinerant preacher on a cross in Jerusalem. - And there were probably many of those.

But what makes the Christian story different, and life changing and world changing are the events of Easter Day. This itinerant preacher did not remain dead, he rose from the dead and lives for evermore.

As Christians we often talk about being saved by the cross; being cleansed by the blood of Jesus. Our Holy Communion service or Eucharist focusses on Jesus saying "this is my body" and "this is my blood". Many of us spent 2 hours here on Friday

afternoon thinking about the cross, and in particular Jesus's words from the cross. There are countless hymns and songs which focus entirely on the cross and the crucifixion – when I survey, The old rugged cross, lift high the cross etc etc

And surely that is right. But it also begs the question that if the cross brings our salvation; if we are put right with God by the cross; if our sins are forgiven by virtue of Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross – what is Easter Day all about? Why do we need anything more than the sacrificial death of Jesus?

By his death on the cross we are given the opportunity to receive forgiveness of our sins; to be put right with God; to be given the chance to start afresh with a clean sheet; to have the opportunity to enter into a restored relationship with him. All we have to do is say yes. Yes to the offer – made freely by grace – of all this.

And the resurrection? This surely looks to the future.

The fact that Jesus has risen from the dead – and the fact that this resurrection was physical – changes things.

Our first reading today from Acts contains a story where Peter – one of the 12 of course – describes how he ate and drank with Jesus after he rose from the dead. *I am a witness to this* he says to confirm it. And Paul in our reading from 1 Corinthians talks of over 500 people being witnesses to the resurrection – more than 500 people having seen Jesus alive – in bodily form – after his death.

The empty tomb that Mary discovered; the encounter she had in the garden with Jesus who called her by name all testify to the same thing. The biblical writers leave us in no doubt that it happened. That it was physical; that Jesus rose from the dead.

And if we read on in 1 Corinthians beyond the end of today's passage we become immersed in Paul's argument that because Christ rose from the dead, the resurrection is a reality for us too.

The temptation is to think then, that this only affects us when we die. After all, we don't need to be brought back from the dead until we are dead. And in one sense that's true – it will affect us when we die. Jesus' resurrection points forward to the redemption of the whole world. Not just people, but the whole of creation. There will be a new heaven and a new earth. A new physical perfect reality where God will reign. The resurrection points us towards and is a guarantee of the fact that in the end good will win; love will win; God will be victorious.

The cross says that we are saved from sin; saved from separation from God; saved from all the things that hold us back. Resurrection is concerned with what we are saved for – just as we were thinking about here in St James last Sunday. Saved for a new life as part of God's people in God's Kingdom; saved for us to live a new life in relationship with God; saved to part of the new life that Jesus promised – a life that begins now and lasts into eternity.

And its this "now" time that Jesus was talking about in his teaching and his example about abundant life, fullness of life and the kingdom of God. Remember Jesus' words about the Kingdom – you are not far from the Kingdom; the Kingdom of God is among you; the Kingdom of God is at hand.

Its this "now" time that Paul talks about towards the end of that 15th chapter in 1 Corinthians. *Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labour is not in vain.* In other words don't stop doing good things, don't stop doing the Lord's work because of the hope of the future resurrection. Nothing you do will be wasted!. Life is to be lived now.

The resurrection gives us the opportunity now to live new lives as citizens of the Kingdom of God. To live according to God's values, according to God's teaching, empowered and inspired by God. Having been reunited with God as forgiven people, the resurrection gives us the opportunity to have abundant life, fullness of life. Now. Not in the future but now.

But that fullness of life does not mean there won't be difficulties, or challenges. Sometimes life will be downright tough. It may well be that it seems every day brings a new challenge. But what we are promised is that because the resurrection follows Good Friday the future is secure; God will have the victory; good will triumph over evil; love will be the force that endures.

And this guarantee of the future enables us to live lives now that are Kingdom lives; where the rule and authority of God is seen – maybe not in its full clarity, but at least glimpses of it in our lives and thoughts and words and deeds. Where people can look at us and see something of God.

We see this in the post resurrection lives of Mary and the disciples. The Acts of the apostles is all about this. The letters of Paul testify to it. The history of the church – marked by great deeds and also, sadly, some shameful deeds – also reflects that Kingdom lives can be lived now, albeit not in perfection. That the rule of God can be seen in the thoughts, words and deeds of Christian people like you and me now, not

perfect by any means – we never will be in this world - but in anticipation and hope of the final resurrection.

And its into this new life that we will baptise Nicole this morning. A life freed from sin, and a life free to live as God has always intended. A life with God at the centre and alongside her every day. A life lived to the full.

And the message of Easter Day for us – for me and for you - is that we too can live our lives to the full as God intended. Knowing God, being certain of sins being forgiven and being transformed to follow the example of Jesus now while awaiting the final resurrection in time to come.

In a moment Nicole will make her baptism promises as she marks her entry to this new life. As she does so I invite you in the silence of your hearts to echo those promises – to renew your own baptism vows – as you re-affirm your commitment to this new life.

At the end of the service we will give a lighted candle to Nicole and encourage her with these words:

you have received the light of Christ;
walk in this light all the days of your life.

And we will all say to her

**Shine as a light in the world,
to the glory of God the Father.**

May that be true for us all – that we might Shine as lights in the world because of the resurrection of Jesus

Happy Easter!