

Easter Day 2023 Sermon

Readings:

Jeremiah 31: 1-6

Acts 10: 34-43

Matthew 28: 1-10

Well what a day!

And what a claim. It is really outrageous isn't it? That a man who had died, somehow escaped from a sealed stone tomb and was then seen alive by many people. So why **do** we mark - and even believe it?

Over 2000 years of Christianity, countless people prepared to die for their faith, the evidence of the empty tomb and the contemporaneous accounts from many otherwise rational and reasonable of seeing Jesus alive after his confirmed death are all powerful testimony to the truth of the resurrection. This is the event we celebrate today, and the event that changed the way we live and our views on death - forever.

Jesus was raised from death, life coursed through him, and unlike Lazarus, Jairus's daughter and the Elijah's widow, Jesus did not die again. He was changed in his resurrected life, and because of him we can live changed lives NOW and can have faith that we will be transformed when we leave this earthly life.

Jesus by rising again, conquered death – death no longer has the last word.

This is GOOD NEWS INDEED.

What I love about Matthew's account is that it so physical!

Earthquakes, angels coming down from heaven, so strong as to move the stone, and shining like lightning. And Can you remember the description of the angel?

His face shone like lightning and his clothes were as white as snow

I love that the angel rolled away the stone – and then sat on it. A defiant gesture as if to say – a massive stone eh? Sealed by soldiers eh? Huh, that's nothing to me!!

So Why does Matthew emphasize these vivid descriptions?

In scripture, the presence of God is often heralded by geological signs – floods, rocks splitting, water emerging in the desert, thunder, sudden darkness etc. So this would have been another sign to those hearing or reading Matthew's gospel that God was present...

Matthew wanted everyone to wake up and notice this extraordinary event. It is something everyone needs to know about. Just like we cannot ignore an earthquake in our midst, neither can we ignore this crucified man who is now risen, and the power which accompanied it.

It is relevant to all of us because it makes a difference to all of us.

Why? Because it affects not only in how we think about dying, but also how we live.

Jeremiah quotes God who says

I have loved you with an everlasting love

Therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.

He says to us through Jesus – I still love you with a love that surpasses all other love. And I am stronger than any negative and destructive force you will encounter.

You will live again – so get out the tambourines and get ready to dance!

This is God's message to us today. I LOVE YOU SOO MUCH! You matter. And so do your fellow human beings – you are all so precious to me...

And I love you even when you don't feel very lovable or very important or as though you are worth much. Even if you are desperately sad, grasping at glimmers of hope, and very anxious or frightened'.

Remember, the disciples closed to Jesus betrayed and deserted him – yet he still died for them.

Do not be afraid said the Angel – in flaming white and shining like lightening... do not be afraid..

An earthquake, an empty tomb and then an angel - Of course they are going to be afraid! The guards who witness this– great burly brave guards? They were so frightened they fainted as if they were dead.

But the women either didn't see all this or they were amazingly brave. Because the angel spoke to *them* – these faithful, loyal, loving women. The women who didn't desert Jesus, who stayed with him throughout his grizzly and agonizing death. Who had come to anoint the body of their beloved. It was to these people that this message of hope was given. 'I know you are looking for Jesus who was crucified', said the angel, 'but he isn't here. He is risen from the dead. Just as he said it would happen'.

And then they were told to go and tell the others. Women in those days had little status, (Like children) yet here they are being tasked with the most important message in history. A lesson in the upside down Kingdom of God values on day 1.

They were very frightened but also filled with great joy. That is often how we feel when we decide to follow Jesus– it is indeed quite scary – none of us knows what will be asked of us – yet it is accompanied by great joy – as if we are doing the right thing. This joy is the power of the Holy Spirit of God – about whom we will hear more in the coming weeks.

The women did as they were asked - and as they went, Jesus met them. And greeted them. It was personal. He gave them his attention – as they had given him theirs. They were obedient in faith, frightened, yet firm in their conviction that something extraordinary was happening. And Jesus honoured this, met and greeted them.

This is how it is – we are met by Jesus in desperate times, in times of great fear and uncertainty. It may be in a fleeting moment of calm, joy or peace. As fleeting as the sight of a kingfisher perhaps. It may be in something someone says, or something we hear said, or something we read in scripture. Jesus Christ meets us in all these ways and in others too.

And he says, you matter. I love you this much. And that is when we can remember what he did for us, what he did to overcome the most powerful evil possible.

Nothing the human race could throw at him could or can contain him. And if we live in him, and he in us, we too can know that whatever awful things might happen, and they do - to us, or to our fellow human beings - He IS with us. And he is often with us in the form of other people, and we might be those people to others, which is why it is important we live to love others as he loves us.

That is what the resurrection means.

And that is why Matthew wants us to sit up, and take notice of it. Today.