

# **Easter Sunday**

## **Sunday 12 April 2009**

### **Rev Brian Senior**

#### **Readings:**

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

Psalm 118:14-24

John 20:1-18

#### **Sermon**

Some years ago, Private Eye magazine ran a cartoon depicting St Peter standing in front of the Cross and saying to the other Disciples:

"It's time to put this behind us now and move on."

Offensive? ... maybe!

It was actually a satire, not on Christian belief, but on politicians trivialising important events for the sake of political expediency. The joke depended on the fact of the centrality of the death of Jesus ... that it is impossible to shrug it off ... and that it was his Resurrection, over and above everything else, that motivated the early Christians into mission action.

Walk with Mary to the garden on that first Easter morning.

It is still dark. Mary has spent a long, terrible day and a sleepless night waiting for this moment, when the Sabbath had passed and she could return to the tomb where her Lord's body had been laid to rest.

What does she hope to find?

The other gospel writers tell us that there were other women with her ... Mary the mother of James, and Salome ... women who had been among the disciples who came with Jesus from Galilee – and that they had come with spices to anoint the body, according to Jewish burial customs.

But John focuses on Mary Magdalene alone ... Mary, of whom much had been forgiven ... who had waited at the foot of the cross, unwilling to leave Jesus until he died ... and who had followed Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus when they took Jesus' body to be buried in Joseph's own, new tomb.

Mary comes to the garden, weighed down with sorrow, and discovers that the tomb is open – the stone which had been rolled across the entrance to close the tomb had been rolled away ... and the body of Jesus is gone.

Mary's assumption was that someone had taken the body ... and many down the centuries since have said that she was right ... but it wasn't true. It's a classic argument:

- the sceptic says someone stole the body of Jesus so they could pretend he had risen.
- faith says a bunch of frightened men were hardly in a position to overwhelm a Roman guard, steal the body and keep it hidden from the authorities ... and all anyone would need to do to prove that Jesus was still dead was to produce the body.

The fact is that the disciples were not expecting this.

Come Good Friday, when the news that Jesus was dead reached them, they were convinced it was all over. Seeing the empty tomb was not going to change their minds.

It seemed to them that either Jesus had been mistaken about being the Son of God, or God had chosen not to save him after all. Either way they were defeated, dispirited and beaten. The folded grave clothes mystified them, but they were no closer to believing.

Not yet.

It was Mary, once again, who would not just give in. As she waited by the tomb, weeping and wondering, she encountered first the two angels who asked her why she was weeping, and then the Lord Jesus himself. It ought not to surprise us that she did not recognise him at first – it *was* Jesus ... but he was not the same.

Jesus' resurrected body was not just his old body reanimated. As we read on through the gospel we discover that it was transformed in various ways ... it could pass through locked doors ... Jesus could be present one moment and gone the next ... he was no longer subject to human limitations, sickness and death.

Jesus told her:

*"Go ... to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"*

... and Mary went to the disciples with the glorious news: *"I have seen the Lord!"*

Mary was, in effect, the first evangelist. She was the first to know that Jesus had risen, and the first to be commissioned to share the good news with others that he was alive.

The various gospels describe how the disciples received the news:

- Matthew is silent on the matter.
- Mark tells us that they did not believe it.
- Luke says that the words seemed to them like nonsense.
- John says only that on that same evening they were still hiding behind locked doors, in fear of the Jews, which hardly speaks of men who believed their Master had risen from the dead.

Bishop Tom Wright gives us at a least part of an explanation:

*"Resurrection" to 1st-century Jews wasn't about "going to Heaven": it was about the physically dead being physically alive again. Some Jews (not all) believed that God would do this for all people in the end. Nobody, including Jesus' followers, was expecting one person to be bodily raised from the dead in the middle of history.*

So despite all that Jesus had said to them, their Jewish mind-set made it hard for the disciples to take on board what he was telling them. When he spoke of Resurrection, they thought about the end of the age. They just didn't get it.

But why is it so important? Wonderful as the resurrection is ... what does it all mean?

The meaning of the resurrection has been hidden both by poor teaching in the Church and the anti-Christian agenda of the secular world. The Church has turned Jesus'

Resurrection into a "happy ending" after the dark and messy story of Good Friday, so that when we talk of the resurrection we are really saying "Jesus went to Heaven" ... and the secular world jokes about 'conjuring tricks with bones' because no-one believes in miracles any more.

The Church talks about Easter as the reason for believing that "There really is life after death" ... and the world shrugs its shoulders. Lots of people believe in life after death, but they do that without necessarily believing in Jesus.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul shows us why the resurrection is so important.

We need to remember that Paul had been the chief persecutor of the Church. He had made a career out of rubbishing the Christian faith. As a loyal Jew, he had made it his business to seek out Christians, arrest them, and put them in prison. He was a dangerous man, fired by a passionate belief that this new religion needed to be stamped out. Nowadays we might call him a religious extremist, or even a terrorist.

That was, of course, until he met Jesus ... on the road to Damascus, when he was setting out to find more believers there, and bring them back to Jerusalem in chains. Jesus appeared to him in a vision and showed him that what he was doing was wrong ... and Paul changed from being someone who hated Jesus, to one of his most faithful followers.

Paul now knows that coming to know Jesus is the most important thing in life, because it is through Jesus that we are saved. Knowing how Jesus has changed his life, he wants to make sure that everyone else has the opportunity to know Jesus for themselves ... and so in this passage in 1 Corinthians 15 he sets out what the gospel - the good news of Jesus - is all about ... the things we really need to know in order to be saved from our sins and have a new life with God ... and the assurance of eternal life in his presence

So ... what are these basics?

1. Jesus died ... taking the punishment for our sins ... so that we can be forgiven.
2. Jesus was buried ... and everyone thought that was the end of the matter.
3. Jesus rose again ... and lots of people saw him ... and that is our reason for hope.

But why does Paul make a point of saying that each of these things was 'according to the Scriptures'? It is because he wants us to know that none of this happened by accident.

God had planned from the beginning that he would send his Son to rescue us from the consequences of our sins ... and hundreds of years before Jesus was born, the prophets had foretold how it would happen. None of it was an accident or a coincidence ... it all happened according to plan.

1. Jesus died, because sin has to be paid for. Because God is utterly good ... utterly holy ... and because sin is really a rejection of God - he cannot simply overlook it.

The sacrifices of the Old Testament could only ever be a partial solution. What was needed was one, perfect sacrifice which could deal with sin for ever ... and that sacrifice was Jesus.

The death of Jesus is not in doubt. There is a mass of historical evidence, and not just from Christian sources. Roman soldiers were professional killers who would not allow

a not-quite-dead rebel leader to stay that way for long. By Friday evening, he was gone.

2. Jesus was buried, which emphasises his humanity, and his identification with us. His disciples grieved, believing that all was lost ... and his enemies gloated, believing they had won. But the tomb became the setting for the greatest miracle of all.
3. Jesus rose again, because death could not hold him. The awesome power of God breathed new life into the cold flesh, and Jesus rose from death with his resurrection body ... the prototype of the resurrection bodies we shall have when Jesus returns.

Many people - sadly, too many Christian preachers - have watered down the resurrection ... but we must not lose our nerve and dilute the truth. When the first Christians told the story of the resurrection, they were not saying "Jesus is still with us in a spiritual sense" or even "I think he's gone to heaven." They said quite clearly ... Jesus is risen from the dead.

The tomb was empty ... the body was gone ... because God had raised him back to life again. This is a fact ... and if it were not so, we would have no faith worth building our lives on, and no reason to worship Jesus as Lord and Saviour. In fact ... we would be a sad and deluded bunch.

To quote Tom Wright again:

*Easter was the pilot project. What God did for Jesus that explosive morning is what he intends to do for the whole creation. We who live in the interval between Jesus' Resurrection and the final rescue and transformation of the whole world are called to be new-creation people here and now. That is the hidden meaning of the greatest festival Christians have.*

So the resurrection is so important because it points to our own future.

Without the resurrection there is no gospel ... no good news ... and no hope of salvation. There has to be more than following Jesus because he was a good man and had fine principles. His message was one of hope, not just for now, but for eternity.

I'll say it again, because this is important. Without the resurrection, the whole of Christianity falls apart, with nothing to hope for, and no reason for believing.

But Jesus did indeed rise from the dead ... and so we do indeed have hope.

The resurrection of Jesus is the hope and guarantee of our own resurrection. As he was raised from the dead, so shall we be ... not exactly the same as we are now, but a new kind of existence with a body like that of Jesus' risen body.

When St Paul speaks of a "spiritual" resurrection body, he doesn't mean "non-material", like a ghost. The Greek word "Spiritual" doesn't tell us what it is made of, but what is animating it. The risen Jesus had a physical body animated by God's life-giving Spirit, and that same Spirit is at work in us, and will have the same effect.

This is our hope ... and this is our future.

The first Christians hailed Jesus as the Messiah despite his execution, and the fact that he had not done what the Jews expected the Messiah to do. He had not defeated the Romans, or brought peace and justice on earth. He did not establish an earthly kingdom.

In the course of his Passion, Jesus had suffered lies and insults, brutality, cruelty and injustice. He was despised and rejected, betrayed and abandoned. His physical pain was, if anything, outmatched by the horror of separation from his Father, and the knowledge that he was truly alone in a way in which no-one else has ever experienced ... for that time on the cross, in complete isolation from his Father.

If it had ended there, Jesus would be remembered as just another failed leader ... a good man who did his best.

But it did not end there, and the only explanation that will fit the evidence is the one the early Christians insisted upon – that he really had been raised from the dead.

The Psalmist wrote (*Psalm 118:22-24*):

*“The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvellous in our eyes. This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.”*

On that Easter morning, while the disciples hid for fear of the Jews and the women went to the tomb, anxious about how they would get in to anoint his body ... the Lord God burst open the door of the tomb, and Jesus walked free. Death was defeated, hope was restored, and salvation was won for every man, woman and child who chooses to put their faith in him.

So, leaving the garden, Mary returned to the disciples with the news, and told them: *“I have seen the Lord!”*

... five words which were to turn their lives upside down.

The forces of atheism and unbelief which are so powerfully at work in the world today, want to hush up the real meaning of Easter ... but now we see what Easter really means.

Easter is about a new creation that has already begun. Death has been defeated, and God is remaking his world ... changing lives ... and promising that all who believe in Jesus will share in his resurrection life. Because Jesus is alive, everything has changed. The world is a different place.

So what difference will the truth that Jesus is risen make to you and me ... today ... next week ... and for the rest of our lives? Are you willing to put your trust in him, and share in his resurrection life?