

SERMON FOR EASTER SUNDAY: FROM THE GOSPEL OF ST. MATTHEW

Where the Gospel of St. Matthew ends, the Christian faith, has it's early beginnings – in the resurrection of Our Lord.

It is not easy for any of us to totally comprehend the Resurrection of Jesus Christ - and it pushes our very reasoning ability to the point of breaking. However, we do not have to explain how the resurrection happened. Rather it explains a wonderful mystery - it establishes who we are and why we are Christians.

This Easter Sunday is different, usually we would be gathered together, celebrating and singing the praises to the One who gave His life for us. We would be renewing our Baptismal promises and repeating for ourselves that 'we turn to Christ'.

This year however circumstances are that we must remain isolated for our health and for the health of others – but this must not stop us from prayer and giving thanks to God for this Easter Day. For we are together in prayer and praise of our Risen Lord Jesus.

Because Easter happened, because the resurrection happened, the church happened – not overnight, certainly, but that is where it all began, well over 2,000 years ago. Because of the Resurrection, the Church was born and continues today.

The Easter story is so familiar that we sometimes fail to hear some of the details of the account.

Let us take a look at three of those details as they are found in Matthew's account of the first Easter morning.

First the stone was rolled away – not to let Jesus out – but to let us in. To open the way for us, to follow Jesus. The idea that God rolled the stone away from the door to let Jesus escape is inconsistent with the resurrection appearance of Jesus recorded elsewhere in the scriptures – appearances in which he suddenly appeared in the midst of the disciples, even when they were behind closed doors.

Closed doors will never keep Jesus in or out. Matthew makes this clear in the Easter reading. In today's Gospel account of the resurrection it was after Mary

Magdalene and the other Mary had come to the tomb that “there was a great earthquake, and an angel of the Lord rolled away the stone and sat on it.”

For centuries the curious have wanted to look, into the dark depths of death, but the tomb has been sealed with secrecy. The tomb has always mocked us. It has stood as the “dead end” of all our efforts to peer beyond this life into the life to come.

The angel tells the two women on the first Easter morning to look inside the tomb, saying to them: “do not be afraid, I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here: for he has been raised – as he said, Come, see the place where he lay.” They were given an invitation – an invitation that is given to us – to take a deeper look and reveal for ourselves what that invitation involves, because Jesus rose from the dead that we may look and see what life with him could be like – when we take the decision to follow him more closely.

Easter rolls the stone door of the tomb away for us, so that we might penetrate the mystery of death. Not to dwell on the morbid, for it makes of the tomb a tunnel – a tunnel into the heart of the eternal and shows us that the Holy heart of God is love and life. God rolls the door of the tomb away not to let Jesus out – but to let us in – to allow us to see that Christ’s promises are true.

Second – the tomb is not completely empty – Christ’s body is not there but the place is filled with the words of the angel, the words we have just heard, the words that say “look, he is not here, he is risen.” The words that continue on, saying:

“come and see, the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell the disciples – he has been raised from the dead and is going ahead of you to Galilee, and there you will see him.”

If the women on the first Easter morning had looked into an empty and silent tomb, then our resurrection faith would be a belief based on human speculation, an assumption of the moment, and argument based on negative evidence.

But no! Our faith is based on a word spoken to us by God. It is based on God's holy promise, spoken by Christ before he died, and upon God's holy assurance – spoken by the angel on the first Easter Dawn. The same words that echo and re-echoed in the Easter tomb still fills the emptiness of the world today. “He is risen”. The tomb has become a trumpet proclaiming the victory of life over death, and the continuation of Christ's presence and mission in His world – first in Galilee, and ultimately to the ends of the earth.

The third detail is – because of Easter we can turn our backs on the grave. Matthew tells us that Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, having heard the angelic assurance, “He is risen”, turned their backs on the grave and ran “with great joy” to tell the disciples.

Joy is the key word here. Jesus was placed in a tomb, but he would not remain there. The tomb would not hold Him – and because of Him – the tomb cannot hold us either. We are free – to live our lives to the fullest, to live in the love of Our Lord Jesus Christ – and to follow in his footsteps.

This indeed is what Jesus promised to us before he died, a promise that seemed at the time totally incredible, but which – because of the Easter miracle, we now know to be a matter of fact and substance.

The stone was rolled away from the tomb, not to let Jesus out, but to let us in, to show us that death is not the end – but rather a new beginning.

A beginning that proclaims the victory of life over death, and which allows us to turn our backs on the grave and face our future with faith and hope, confident that all of God's promises will indeed bear fruit, Jesus Christ is alive in this world today, and leads a procession of millions of his children, which includes you and I so that we may have a life, filled without the fear of death – because he died and rose again, that we may have eternal life with him. For Jesus has indeed risen from the dead for the Glory of all.

May you continue to walk in the Light of the Risen Christ. Amen.

PASTORAL LETTER:

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ

I pray you are looking after yourselves and taking care of your health. Easter is a time to reflect and celebrate the Risen Lord – well it is a bit different this year, but I trust you are still being prayerful and remembering to give thanks ‘in all circumstances’ as the bible tells us. Let us pray that we will come through this crisis stronger in faith and love for one another.

A sincere thank you to all who contributed so generously to our ‘tin food collection’. 63 cans in total, a wonderful achievement over a short period of time. Peter and I delivered them to Anglicare Missions at Elizabeth who were so grateful for the donation, particularly at this very difficult time. So, a big thank you from the mission to you.

I have enclosed the wonderful uplifting words of the 121 psalm and a brief reflection for you to pray and ponder on for Good Friday and the sermons.

May God bless you and keep you and your loved ones safe, this day and always. Amen.

The Rev'd. Yvonne Riley
Locum Tenens, St. Barbara's, Parafield Gardens.

REFLECTION FOR GOOD FRIDAY

The agony in the garden show us the full cost of God's love for us. In his human mind and body, Jesus chose to feel all the fear and anguish of death, all the heart-breaking solitude human beings experience when they feel abandoned by God as they suffer. Confronted by Jesus suffering in the least of his brothers and sisters, we so often take refuge in sleep or turn away, insensible to their pain and call for help.

Many people's faith founders on the stumbling block of evil and suffering. Faith in God can even make them harder to bear, as others echo our own question, 'where is God?' It would be easier to despair, to say that there is no meaning, that all suffering is random and pointless. But the sweat and tears of Jesus express God's endless compassion and love, God's determination to enter into the very heart of darkness, God-with-us to the end. The great question in the face of suffering is not why but how. How can we find the strength to bear it? The prayer of Jesus to the Father show us the way. The Lord's Prayer.

We Pray:

O God of shadows and light, we reach out to you in our deepest need.
Do not let us be overwhelmed by doubt and fear,
but come and walk beside us, in every valley of darkness,
our loving Father and constant comfort. Amen.
A psalm for reassurance and comfort.

PSALM 212

I lift my eyes to the hills – from where does my help come?
My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.
He will not let your foot slip, he who watches over you will not slumber;
Indeed he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.
The Lord watches over you – the lord is your shade at your right hand;
The sun shall not harm you by day, nor the moon by night.
The Lord will keep you from all harm – he will watch over your life;
The Lord will watch over your coming out and your going in, from this day forward
and forever more.