



THIS EASTER MORN

12 APRIL, 2020

*There have been times
when, after long on my knees
in a cold chancel, a stone has rolled
from my mind, and I have looked
in and seen the old questions lie
folded and in a place
by themselves, like the piled
grave clothes of love's risen body.*

- An excerpt from 'The Answer' by R.S. Thomas

*It is often when night looks darkest; it is often before the fever breaks that one senses
the gathering momentum for change when one feels that resurrection of hope amid
despair and apathy.*

- Hillary Clinton, U.S. politician

We, without God, cannot; God, without us, will not.

- St Augustine



A message from Michael

We know this story of Jesus' resurrection very well. It's a moment for joy and hope. The gospel accounts of Jesus' resurrection, while acknowledging such joy, also speak of fear, shock and amazement. Why so?

This wasn't merely a happy ending. It was something else.

Come on a journey this Easter morn to discover the deeper truths about resurrection.

Rev MB

APRIL 12, 2020



Easter Sunday



Image: The Empty Tomb, Herschel Pollard

Jesus was hauled before the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, during the Passover festival.

Every year, a Roman garrison from Caesarea Maritime, on the Mediterranean coast, would march down to Jerusalem to ensure that the thousands of Jewish pilgrims who gathered for Passover did not start a riot. Any semblance of disturbance was dealt with quickly and brutally. It's likely the chief priests and scribes had an agreement with the Romans about this. Jesus' actions in the Temple guaranteed that he came to the attention of the authorities.

When he was arrested, his disciples deserted him.

Pilate held all the cards: authority, power, and military backing. Jesus had nothing. How would he deal with Pilate in this utterly unbalanced situation? He remained silent.

There are clues here for us as we enter further into the COVID-19 pandemic.

Bible Reading

MATTHEW 28: 1-8



After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it.

His appearance was like lightning and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him, the guards shook and became like dead men.

But the angel said to the women, '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. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, "He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him."

'This is my message for you.'

So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples.

Image: The Empty Tomb, Herschel Pollard

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And the earth shook

Sermon: Rev. Michael Barnes



More than ever this year, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, we look for light, hope and community, a sense of resurrection. We have entombed ourselves to help fight the virus, and it seems to be working - we're flattening the curve - but we weren't meant to live in tombs, locked down in our homes.

We long to be released, to return to the way it was. I miss meeting friends for a coffee, hugging members of my family, leading worship in our church, meeting together as a community.

Come, risen Christ!

Resurrection appears to offer hope, a way through this darkness. However, if we align resurrection with a return to normality post-pandemic, with a happy ending, we miss out on its essence.

Let's turn to Rev, the BBC drama we've been following through Lent, for some insight. Adam, the vicar of St Saviour's, had been put on trial. The matter was sent to the Bishop for investigation and deliberation. He then summoned Adam to announce that he had been cleared of the charge. Nonetheless, the experience broke Adam's resolve to keep St Saviour's open. He resigned. Workers quickly moved in to clear away the pews, the communion table, to hollow out St Saviours, to make it ready for a new, lucrative development.

Image: The Empty Tomb, Herschel Pollard

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Adam retreated, crawling under the covers of his bed, broken. It was his tomb. Aware of his distress, his wife Alex, organised a special event on Easter morn. Note that in the gospels, it is women who are the first witnesses of resurrection.

Forcing a very reluctant Adam out of bed, she took him to the now-abandoned St Saviours. There, his community was waiting for him to celebrate Easter.

They broke into the dark, shuttered church - another tomb denied its purpose - and celebrated Easter, lighting candles in the gloom. This celebration in an abandoned church marked a modern-day resurrection.

Adam began it with these words, 'We meet for the last time in this church.'

This moment of resurrection wouldn't stop the church being sold, wouldn't reconstitute the church community of St Saviour's.

The community would disperse. Adam and Alex would go elsewhere. But what a moment it was! It overcame the darkness, made visible what had been opaque, a pathway into a new future. That morning, at the end of the service, Adam and Alex's baby daughter Katie was baptised.

Immediately afterwards, she screamed. Rev. ends with that scream. It's not what we customarily look for, not a happy ending; it's not a return to normal. It's a scream.

Resurrection is a scream, a liberating, full-throated explosive scream. We find echoes of this in the reading from Matthew. As the two women approached the tomb, there was a great earthquake. An earthquake symbolises the shaking of the sure foundations upon which our lives depend.

Later, having encountered an angel, the women ran from the tomb, 'with fear and great joy.' It was fear and great joy, both. Mark's gospel records that 'the women fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them, and they said nothing about it to anyone because they were afraid.' (Mark 16:8)

How can resurrection be fear, amazement and great joy, all of them together? How is this possible? We yearn for what we know. And when normality is disrupted, we crave it even more deeply. We need it, so much so that even when it's long gone, we still see it, as though it's alive and present. 'Return it to the way it was, please!'

However, in that demand, lies darkness and death. We are mostly unaware that normality encodes the very things that cause us and others pain, distress and injustice. A hope that is worthy of the name lies in unravelling it!

To unravel normality, I recommend screaming, suffering earthquakes, watching foundations crumble, and the courage to face fear. It is terrifying to walk a new road into an unknown future when there are few signs, and the maps are rudimentary.

The woman at the tomb understood that.

Screaming may allow us to take a few steps with them. If we don't walk that road, we unwittingly re-energise the very things we claim we want to be free of. A good scream helps liberates us from that addiction. St Augustine wrote, 'We without God cannot, and God without us will not.' Resurrection is God's ultimate gift of grace, an act of hope and defiance, toppling the normality we crave. It is the 'we without God cannot.' Resurrection is also a new pathway that the Spirit of God urges, but cannot compel us, to walk. It's the 'God without us will not.'

I look forward to coffee, hugs, and gathering for worship when this pandemic has passed. I also hope that we won't return to normal.

Several weeks ago, Donald Trump said he wanted churches to be full and businesses reopened by Easter Sunday. Fortunately, Christian leaders responded angrily and promptly, 'We need a resurrection of Jesus's concern for the most vulnerable, not a capitulation to corporate greed that could cost millions of lives.'

Rev Laura Everett tweeted, 'Still fuming about Trump co-opting Easter for capitalism.' If the resurrection means anything, it means overturning, dethroning, the compelling drive to make more and more money.

During this pandemic, we have witnessed significant changes, more concern for the unemployed, no longer regarded 'bludgers,' now seen as people in need of support.

We've seen more appreciation of healthcare workers, and those who support others in all sorts of hidden ways. Now, we can dream of a society based, not on profit and the market, but compassion.

That dream is resurrection.

Please, God, do not let us return to normal!

In AD30, in a flash of light, of joy and fear, Jesus' resurrection overturned the imperial power of Rome. It blazed forth a new path.

The brightness has faded, but the path is still open. Let's walk it.

Christ is risen!

Amen.

Communion

If you have bread and wine, please partake of these elements during Communion. If not, please know that all are held in the love of Christ and of this community.

AN INVITATION

All: We meet in strange times,
unable to gather together in one community.

One: Nonetheless, God's Spirit connects us,
as we wait for a glimpse of the holy:
listen for a whisper of truth:
hope for a touch of compassion:
in the presence of mystery:

All: In bread broken, we see the world's hunger, recalling that many see it as normal that millions of people lack bread.

One: In this cup poured out, we see the world's thirst, recalling that many regard it as normal for millions not to have enough to drink.

All: In Jesus, crucified and risen, we see what is unusual and abnormal, profound giving, a nobody restored to life.

One: Thanks be to God, who has turned the powers of this world on their head!

NARRATIVE

When they had gathered for Passover, Jesus took a loaf of bread. After blessing it, he broke it, sharing it with his disciples, 'Take, eat; this is my body broken for you.' Then he took a cup. After giving thanks, he poured it out, sharing it with his disciples, 'Drink from it, all of you; this is my lifeblood poured out for the healing of many.' Come, Holy Spirit, turn what is normal on its head. In bread broken and a cup poured out, let us catch a glimpse of a new world.

BREAKING BREAD

It is Christ, the bread of life, who satisfies the hungry heart.
It is Christ, the bearer of grace, who revives the thirsty.
These are the gifts of God, for us, the people of God.

SHARING COMMUNION

An opportunity for you to break bread and share a cup.

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Stay in touch



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