

## **Easter Day Sermon Preached at St John's, Devizes, 4 April 2021**

*Readings – 1 Corinthians 15: 1–11; Mark 16:1–8*

*“So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”*

May I speak in the name of God, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

When I was boy, the local radio station my mother always listened to in the morning had a daily feature of the wackiest snippets from the day's papers. One Easter week, it told the story of a church on the previous Sunday, that I seem to remember was in Devon. When the parishioners arrived for the main Easter Day Eucharist, they were told that their newly installed vicar, the Reverend So-and-so, had died suddenly on the afternoon of Good Friday. Nonetheless, his wife had battled on to make the church bright and full of new life for Easter morning. The show must go on and all that.

The parishioners were distraught, some openly weeping as the service began, with a strangely hollow Gloria and then the readings. At the end of the Gospel, some strange bumping noises began to be heard from the giant, two metre-high, papier maché egg, that some of the churchgoers only at that point noticed was stationed just below the pulpit. Soon, holes began to be punched in the egg from the inside by a pair of furious fists. Suddenly, out jumped the vicar, with a cry of “Surprise!

He said his aim was to allow the parishioners to actually feel the sense of shock that the first disciples felt when they realised that Jesus had actually risen from the dead. The parishioners were, however, deeply unimpressed. I think they must have written some stiff letters to the Bishop of Exeter afterwards.

I can promise you that I shan't resort to such histrionics at any point in my time with you at St John's. That Devon vicar from 35 years or so ago clearly made a rather crude error of judgement. Yet, for all its emotionally manipulative crassness, his stunt did get across one easily missed point; the experience of the Resurrection was, at least at first, deeply disturbing and upsetting.

The Resurrection was not a sugary fable made up by people who couldn't cope with the tragedy of their hero's death, not a crutch to avoid dealing with reality, but an event that upends the most basic certainty in any of our lives: that they have an end. "Nothing is sure in life except death and taxes" is a modern American construction, but it would be instantly comprehensible to a resident of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century Roman Empire.

The two Marys and Salome were among the handful of people, nearly all women, who had stuck with Jesus right to the very end and witnessed at first hand his brutal execution on the Cross. Now his body had vanished and a mysterious apparition had told them that Christ was "risen". Nothing could ever be the same again.

The account of the Resurrection that we heard this morning, that from the Gospel of St Mark, was the earliest to be written. It has always been convincing to me precisely because it doesn't attempt to hide how disturbing and incomprehensible the Resurrection was for its first witnesses. The story doesn't end in a triumphant reappearance from Jesus, but with the women running screaming out into the dawn, terrified and bewildered. This is nothing like what the holy books of constructed religions look like – we've had enough of them over the past few hundred years, from the Book of Mormon to the works of Scientology, to know. Nobody would make up this story if they wanted to convince people of some religious fake news.

In fact, this was too strange an ending, so a few hundred years later, a new conclusion to St Mark's Gospel, more conventional and neatly wrapped-up, was invented using material from the other Gospels. It's only in the last few generations that scholarship has made that clear, and we've returned to the original ending, thank God. Not only because it is more convincing, but because it also far closer to my own actual experiences of encounters with God, and I think that is true for many of us. We expect to confirm our knowledge that God is dead, and instead find that His apparent absence is because He is risen. We recognise Him not because he appears to us in clouds with thunderclaps, but because we hear rumours from those trusted least and, if we are lucky, we see the unmistakable signs that He has been in the vicinity and upended the order of things.

The good news that Christ did indeed rise from the dead can be disturbing, I think in part because, we human beings can be surprisingly content to rest, often rather resentfully, in a shoddy but predictable present. Even a prison has a routine and three square meals a day. Resurrection means that the present state of things will be disturbed; fear of the unknowable future can drive us to cling to a present that is no longer life-giving. As the old saying goes, "I don't mind the despair, it's the hope that I can't stand."

Embracing new life, in any sense, takes courage. Embracing the Resurrection takes the courage to accept an idea about the nature of reality that our modern Western culture, consumed with the idea of its clever sophistication, rejects as primitive and stupid.

That disturbing good news of Jesus Christ's Resurrection isn't just about our eternal destiny, but how we live our lives now. The knowledge that Christ has opened the way to eternal life should enable us to see more clearly and freely

the world we live in and our place in it, unchained from the need for self-justification and denial and all the other silly games we play because we're frightened that we're not really people of much worth. Yet, in reality we're people of such immense worth that Christ stretched out His arms on the Cross to carry us over into eternal life. That knowledge of that divine love should free us, at least a little, from those fears and doubts and inability to love ourselves that prevent us living our lives to the full – free to love and not to hate; free to forgive and not to bear grudges; free to trust and not to fear.

It should free us to try to live out the Resurrection on earth, as it is in heaven. That can be frightening, as it was for Mary Magdalene, and Mary the Mother of James, and Salome, on a Sunday morning two-thousand years ago. But if we embrace a life of Resurrection, God can lead us to fuller lives than we could ever have imagined for ourselves.

Now to the only wise God our saviour, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen.