

## Reflection on the Word: Easter Sunday, April 1, 2018 1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Mark 16:1-8

Our worship began with the proclamation: Christ is Risen! Christ is risen indeed!

But what does it mean that Christ is risen? What does resurrection mean? I expect that if each of you were to answer, I would hear quite a variety of responses. And though resurrection lies at the very heart of Christianity, the reality is that Christians have been struggling to come to terms with it ever since the very first rumours of the risen Christ had begun to circulate.

The apostle Paul was the first to write of the resurrection experience, some 20 years before the earliest gospel, Mark. He said: "If Christ has not been raised, then all of our preaching has been meaningless—and everything you've believed has been just as meaningless."

The thing is, whether we believe in resurrection as an actual physical resuscitation of Jesus' body, or whether we believe it was some kind of a spiritual experience where Jesus was present to those first followers, and then later, to Paul himself, the one very clear thing we do know about the Easter story and Jesus' resurrection is that it made a difference in the lives of those who knew and loved him.

There is an old legend of a priest who found a branch of a thorn tree all twisted round so that it resembled a crown of thorns. Thinking it a symbol of the crucifixion, he placed it on the altar in his country church on Good Friday. Early on Easter morning he remembered what he had done. Feeling it was not appropriate for Easter Sunday, he hurried into the church to clear it away before the congregation arrived. But when he went into the church, he found the thorn branches blossoming with beautiful roses.

It has been said that the simplest meaning of Easter is that we are living in a world in which God has the last word. On Friday, it seemed that evil had won. Jesus was crucified ... hope seemed defeated. His followers were afraid. But we know the rest of the story and we exult in the glorious message: Christ is risen! Three words which, without doubt, have altered the whole destiny of humankind and literally turned the world upside down.

Of course, it didn't seem that way, not at first, to those women who went to the tomb, carrying spices to anoint the body of Jesus, and carrying in their hearts, a heavy load of grief and despair. Mark, the oldest of the gospels, actually has the women leaving the tomb, not excitedly witnessing to the resurrection, but filled with such terror and amazement, that they said nothing to anyone.

And it is interesting to note that this gospel ending became so problematic to the people of the early church, and so inconsistent with the resurrection stories of the other gospels, that eventually two other endings were added to Mark's

telling of the story. I suggest you go home and take out your Bibles and have a look. Part of one of those endings goes like this

***And they went back and told the rest, but they did not believe them. Later he appeared to the eleven themselves as they were sitting at the table; and he upbraided them for their lack of faith and stubbornness, because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen. And he said to them, "Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation ..."***

The confusion and the disbelief of those first followers of Jesus is still felt by many of us when it comes to the Easter story. Was the resurrection a supernatural resuscitation of a corpse, or perhaps some kind of hallucination, or was it something deeply spiritual that enabled Jesus' disciples to feel and experience his presence with them? Could it be that the followers of Jesus saw the power of God within a man to an extent that they had never encountered before – in his life, his teachings, his compassion, his ministry of healing? And that after Jesus died, they still experienced the power of God that they had seen within Jesus, even though their teacher was no longer with them?

The biblical accounts of the risen Christ, despite their variety and discrepancy, nonetheless represent a powerful experience, expressed through the witness of the first followers of Jesus. They are stories not about the supernatural, but about the mystical experience of the living power of God in the world. Some scholars suggest that as these stories were told and interpreted over decades, in a time in which people expected to encounter God in the world, these resurrection stories came to be conveyed with body imagery. And that though we need not take these stories literally, we must take them seriously.

Because out of the story of Jesus' death and resurrection, comes the powerful affirmation that suffering, pain, doubt ... and death itself, does not have the last word. That there is a power that is eternal and infinite that is able to "conquer even death" because it is the source of existence and of life.

"Death has been swallowed up in victory," Paul says, reminding us that death and the grave are no longer to be feared. Paul insists that death and the grave are very much a part of the journey into the fullness of God's love – the journey into the presence and indeed, into the heart and soul of the Living God. Resurrection reminds us that Love's power will not be defeated, and that ultimately God will bring life out of death. And that doesn't mean just out of the physical death of the body. God brings life where hope and dreams have died; where long-held ideas and beliefs are transformed and give way to something new; where we learn to live, even with our aging body, our forgetful mind, our many limitations, in ways that still give life meaning and purpose.

The good news about Easter is that resurrection is not limited to Jesus, nor is it limited to the end of our life. Resurrection happens throughout creation, and

over and over throughout our lifetimes. Resurrection can and does happen here and now.

It happens when the doctor announces that the surgery was successful, or the cancer is in remission; or when a long-lost son or daughter finally returns home. It happens when after months of waiting in hospital, an elderly loved one is finally admitted to a nursing home. Resurrection occurs when our spirits soar at the beauty of a sunrise; when we hold a newborn child or grandchild; wherever we find love that takes away the loneliness; where after a lay-off, we find new employment; when a word of forgiveness is spoken and received. The miracle of Easter is not just about the resurrection of Jesus - it is about our own resurrections, too.

Easter is about being prepared to be surprised by God in strange places, in ways we never thought we'd see and through words we never thought we'd hear.

Some wise person has said that no one is ever ready to encounter Easter until he or she has spent time in the dark place where hope cannot be seen. Easter is the last thing we are expecting. And that is why it terrifies us. Easter is not about bunnies, springtime and cute new dresses. It's about more hope than we can handle.

Clarence Jordan, who some of you may know as author of the Cotton Patch Gospels, said:

"The proof that God raised Jesus from the dead is not the empty tomb, but the *full hearts of his transformed disciples*. The crowning evidence that he lives is not a vacant grave, but a *spirit-filled fellowship*. Not a rolled-away stone, but a *carried-away church*." And so perhaps we should worry *less* about what people say they believe happened 2,000 years ago and *more* about whether we are living as if resurrection still happens. The question is, "How are we partnering with God today in transforming despair into hope, apathy into compassion, hate into love, and death into new life?"

In Jesus, his followers heard the voice of God. In Jesus, his followers discovered the wisdom of God. In Jesus, his followers experienced the love of God. Those who followed and loved Jesus experienced life in ways that were so earth shattering, so mind-blowing, that their lives would never be the same again. The power of the love they experienced in their life with Jesus could not be constrained or ended by Jesus' death.

Long after they found the empty tomb, Jesus' loved ones continued to experience his presence in very real ways. In the breaking of the bread, and in the meals they shared together; as they walked the pathways they had walked with Jesus, and as they built communities of faith-filled people who also witnessed to the power of his love in all that they said and did.

We are part of a long line of witnesses to the resurrection. And so we proclaim, in our words and our actions:  
Christ is risen! Alleluia!