

Easter Day 21 April 2019

Acts 10: 34-43; Luke 24: 1-12

Sermon preached by the Right Reverend Martin Seeley

Alleluia. Christ has risen! *He is risen indeed! Alleluia.*

A happy Easter to you all.

After the long walk of Lent, with our annual disruption of what we take for granted through whatever it was we gave up or took up, and the questioning and the searching that leads us into, after the disturbance of our routine; and after the intensity of Holy Week and Good Friday, with the sorrow and grief at the cross - after all this we tumble into Easter, to greet the resurrection of Jesus with joy and relief – that, despite what the spirit of our age would have us believe, it is not in the end up to us, we are not the fashioners of our own destiny, we are not makers of our own meaning, but we are the overjoyed recipients of God's gift of life.

And what would the spirit of our age have us believe?

Let me use the example of Kayak, the internet travel search engine – one of those companies that compares fares and hotel rates to, it assures us, to get the best one for you. They have been running advertisements which I have to say I have found perplexing. A young traveller, apparently a café owner, seems to be presented through Kayak with a great travel opportunity, and apparently without any concern for their work colleagues, just leaves for this latest exotic adventure. And after various scenes of enjoying the sites of this latest destination, the punch line, said by this carefree globe trotter, is “For travel, I trust Kayak. For everything else, I trust myself.”

Oh dear, I find myself thinking, this will end in tears. Now, maybe you will say I get too involved in these 30 second advert story lines, but and it's not to pick on Kayak, but we all

know that we cannot fully trust any business or human organisation, even our own business, even Waitrose, and more to the point, we know we cannot entirely trust ourselves.

We know what we are like. There are some things, yes, we can largely trust ourselves on, and others trust us for. Things we feel able to do, be good at doing even. Or qualities that we recognise in ourselves or people have told us they value in us. There are lots of ways we do trust ourselves. But not all the time. And certainly not, in the Kayak phrase, for “everything else.” We know all too well the truth of St Paul’s words, “the good that I would I do not; but the evil that I would not I do.” We cannot rely on ourselves, not all the time, not completely.

But at a deeper level, we cannot rely on ourselves for who we are, what makes us us. We do try. We might rely for who we are on our families, our relationships, our jobs. We might rely on some sense of the order of things, some sense of the way the world is, or that part of it we inhabit. But what happens when something changes? When family relationships or key friendships change, or family move away, or we discover things about our family that had been kept hidden, or relationships are stretched to breaking point? Or what happens when things at school or college don’t turn out the way we had hoped, when we change jobs, or lose our job, or retire and find ourselves wondering, who am I now? We are all faced with these questions and we are never more so than when we are bereaved, when we lose our beloved, or when we are faced with our own death. Who am I now?

What do we rely on, not just in those times that face us with those questions, but all the time, underneath everything else, underneath all our self-assurance and bravado, or our timidity and apprehension, or when we are just being ourselves, what do we rely on?

And as we listen to this morning’s gospel reading, can we put ourselves in those women’s place, and wonder what had been happening to them, and to the rest of his disciples? What

were they relying on now? The one in whom they had relied for meaning and purpose, for giving hope and shape to their lives and the lives of countless others, to give them love and a sense that love was for ever, all this has turned out to be shockingly unreliable. The love they had known from him was unreliable; his assurance, his confidence, his peacefulness, his words, his actions, his authority, were unreliable.

It seemed that like all of us, they had relied on the unreliable and when that was taken away everything is taken away. It is difficult to imagine the devastation – and fear, anger, depression that they would have been experiencing in their shock.

But then something happened that changed everything. It's hard for us to grasp what it was. It's even hard to grasp from the accounts we have in the New Testament. But somehow they discovered Jesus was alive again, and he came to them, and spoke with them, and to Mary Magdalene he told not to hold on to him, and to Thomas he "put your hand here, in my wounds", and he seemed to appear through locked doors, yet could eat with them. And almost invariably, they did not recognise him. But it was him, and not only was he alive but it has been the testimony of countless people since that event nearly 2000 years ago that he is alive to them, too, right down to us, here today.

And suddenly the one who had been utterly reliable, and then whose reliability was destroyed, restores all the faith and trust that his friends had placed in him, not just for themselves, not just for that moment, but for all in all time. For here is the one we have come to know as the embodiment, the incarnation of the creator of the universe, who has shown that no force of evil or power of darkness can change the utter reliability of God's presence and God's love.

That is why, seemingly implausibly, within weeks of Jesus' death his followers were themselves willing to die for him.

And so what Jesus' resurrection has given us is the shaping reality of our lives – that good overcomes evil, that evil may persist but has no lasting power, that death is the entry into that new life which we see in those tantalising tales of Jesus' risen life. This is who we are, when life is going well, and when life is challenging and difficult. This is who we are. People who know that God's love and presence, the power of God's love are unshakeable and unchangeable

Last week we watched with horror as Notre Dame burned. It was and is a calamity – that such a building should be consumed and so quickly – that such a building on which generations have relied on, for just being there and offering assurance of something lasting and greater, even in deeply secular France, that such a reliable building should become so unreliable, and faith wavered for a moment.

But what was so striking to me was the way that people quickly grasped on to hope, could see new life emerging from the ashes even as she burned, so that when it was revealed that the structure was sound, the golden cross of the altar shone through the smoke, the grand organ was saved, and indeed the 200,000 bees kept in hives on the roof had survived, all that was received as news that was at once astonishing and yet to be expected in equal measure. In some form or other, whether we recognise it at first or not, resurrection follows death. And we know this is true. We live by it – we expect good eventually to reappear, however horrific things may seem.

It is as if despite our society's seemingly secular direction, the truth of the resurrection has seeped into our hearts and minds. There's plenty of course to argue against that, but there is enough for it to make you wonder at just how secular our society is.

And then came this morning's terrible news, from the complexly religious society of Sri Lanka, that more than 160 Christian worshippers have been killed by bombs as they celebrated the Resurrection. In that horror, as we pray for them and all who are affected,

we pray too that the Resurrection will give them strength in their grief, and that this terrible evil has no lasting victory.

The resurrection shapes us. It has shaped our world. It shapes our lives – because, despite everything, we live in hope. And it shapes our actions, because it means that the good is worth striving for, that our world is precious, our communities are precious, and working for their good is what living in the resurrection means. And whether you respond to David Attenborough, or to Extinction Rebellion, resurrection means changing the way we treat our planet. It means tackling the causes as well as the symptoms of the alarming rise in mental illness in our society. It means working together not against one another as we seek the common good for our country and our neighbours.

Resurrection means wanting to change the way we live so that others might live too. Resurrection means building bridges not walls, reaching out in love not lashing out in fear. Resurrection is the freedom of knowing that who we are does not depend on us, our destiny does not depend on us, but on the one who is our creator and our saviour, rescuing us from ourselves.

So back to Kayak. We may be very happy to see our lives in a kayak, or prefer seeing ourselves as part of a crew of a catamaran or perhaps a helpful tug boat or a in a great crowd in an ocean liner then. Whatever way we see ourselves travelling through life, we do so knowing that the risen Jesus is the kayak, and the catamaran, and the tug boat and the cruise liner, and he is the water who buoys us, come what may, he is the utterly reliable water of life that rescues, refreshes, renews, cleanses and revives us, and will bear us up as we tackle the calm and the storm, and will carry us safe to the indescribable joy of heaven, to the vastness of God's love.

With huge joy and immense relief we proclaim, Alleluia. Christ is Risen! *He is risen indeed!*
Alleluia.