



Third Sunday of Easter

Sermon by the Reverend Philip Banks, Residentiary Canon and Precentor

Luke 24.36-48

“You are witnesses of these things”.

Alleluia Christ is Risen. He is Risen indeed Alleluia!

The story is told by an acquaintance of mine of a London bus journey, in the week after Easter, of two ladies sitting behind him whose conversation he could not but overhear. The first lady described her Pilates classes – refreshing, giving a new rhythm to life, she felt like a ‘new woman’. She invited her companion to come to one of the classes, and then said “you are a member of your local church, do tell me what it's like there”. The answer came along these lines: “the vicar is so young that he looks like a teenager. The flower arrangers are rude to me. The church is cold and uninviting. And I really hate the modern hymns.”

What testimony from a church going Christian about how her faith has changed her life!

Now listen to this from Annie Dillard in her book ‘Teaching a Stone to Talk’:

“It is madness to wear ladies’ straw hats to church. We should all be wearing crash helmets. Sidesmen should issue life jackets and a signal flare. They should lash us to our pews. For the Resurrection God may draw us out to where we can never return.”

We worship and awesome God who loves us, holds us tight, stretches his arms out in love for us on the cross, don’t we! The Resurrection of Jesus turns weeping into laughter, darkness into light, hurts into healing: bursts from the tomb, offers us transforming grace and life beyond life.

No wonder the earliest Christians shouted

Alleluia Christ is Risen. He is Risen indeed Alleluia.

I love Malcolm Guite’s Easter Sonnet’:

*From this day that tomb becomes a womb.
The Earth is shaking with her labour pain...
An angel-midwife rolls away the stone,
and from the tomb the kingdom is reborn.*

Alleluia Christ is Risen. He is Risen indeed Alleluia.

But beware of thinking that Eastertide is only about resurrection. For Christianity, at its centre, is the story of love’s mending of wounded hearts. The church has always taught that the Eastertide Paschal Mystery is the Triduum - three days:



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Thursday – betrayal, loneliness, abandonment.

Friday – bleak cruel death.

Saturday – a world without the light and love of Christ.

Eastertide is about these things, as well as about the empty tomb. That's why Jesus appears, in today's gospel to the disciples, not somehow 'perfect' or unblemished. Rather he bears the scars of passion and death.

The passion and death of Christ is the expression of God's undying love for us, for you and me – through the pain of the cross.

Easter, and the days leading up to it, are the most important days of the year for the church.

Without the cross, there would be no real faith.

We would not have a God who knows what it is like to suffering to die - Jesus shows his scars to the disciples in today's reading.

We would not have a God who really experiences the pain of humanity, who suffers with us when we suffer.

Without the cross, we would have no Eastertide or resurrection.

And without Jesus rising from the dead, no real faith in the possibility of new beginnings and new life in this life and the life beyond this life.

As you sit here in church, I do not know what burdens or stresses or anxieties or bereavement you carry – what worries you have – perhaps loved ones ill, or the state of the world. We can feel overwhelmed by the mess in the world: climate crisis, politics in a mess war in Ukraine and the Middle East looming over us all. Is the world of fit place for our children and grandchildren?

Well, so it was for the disciples: the gospel today follows on from the Emmaus Road encounter: the account of the disciples in a state of bereavement and shock– they were leaving Jerusalem behind to go to Emmaus. Everything they had dreamed of was now to them a hopeless project, a hopeless prospect. They were in mourning for the dead Jesus.

When people mourn or are in deep grief or shock, there are times when you are convinced that nothing again can come to any good. Of course that is irrational, but we do not say that they are mad or laugh at them – anymore than we would say that someone who has fallen head over heels in love – within irrationally transformed rose tinted worldview – are mad. We might smile, but mourners and lovers maybe sleepless or off their food - but they can keep going. So it was with the disciples, and with the women walking in the chill of the pre dawn blocked up tomb.



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What we celebrate in Eastertide is the Father's response to the cross, his defiant answer to a world that hoped violence could keep Jesus in its hold. In raising Jesus from the dead, God raised every value that Jesus stood for, raised every story that Jesus told, raised every preference that Jesus made, every purpose that Jesus followed. But God has the last laugh.

The message of Eastertide should *overwhelm* us because it says something astonishing. Life, rather than death, has the last word.

Love overcomes darkness and hate and fear.

And Eastertide invites us to join the disciples as witnesses:

“You are witnesses of these things”. Not of cold churches or poor hymn choices!

This season of Eastertide invites us to enter into that *overwhelming* of God when we see that Eastertide is not a celebration of a cozy myth.

Rather it is a real event.

And it is the only reason that we as a church exist in the first place.

Be *overwhelmed* by its reality.

Let that overwhelming *overcome* all the other overwhelms that might cast you down.

I leave you with a story²:

Clare was in the midst of one of those mundane, necessary, seemingly endless tasks: clearing out her small son's untidy room. When she came upon a kaleidoscope. On impulse she held it to the light, then stood transfixed as the colour patterns shifted and changed. How beautiful, she was thinking, when suddenly it occurred to her. What I was seeing through that tiny peephole was nothing more than broken glass. Yet when the light came through at a certain angle, my eyes could see diamonds.

I knew then that I was holding in my hand a metaphor for Christ. For when the light of his life shines through the brokenness of mine, he can transform all the scattered, disjointed pieces into something very beautiful.

Remember that God is in the business of turning all the broken parts of your life and mine and forming them, through the Resurrection, into something very beautiful, bringing wholeness and completeness and joy.

So leave here today as ‘Witnesses’, trusting in God's mighty Resurrection power in our lives.

Alleluia Christ is Risen. He is Risen indeed Alleluia!

May the peace, blessing, love, strength and joy of Eastertide be yours, today and always.

PS: be careful what you say when you're on a bus: it may end up in a sermon.

Philip Banks 2024

¹ published in the Methodist Prayer Handbook 2019/20

² in Stations of the Resurrection by Bishop Guli Francis-Dehqani