How many times in the past few weeks have you said or thought that we are living in unusual, unexpected, even unique times. This is certainly an Easter Day none of us will ever forget.

Strangely that helps us understand how it must have been for the first disciples and followers of Jesus. Easter morning was for them unexpected, absolutely unexpected. They had experienced nothing like it before.

In our ones and twos and our family groups this morning, never imagining we would celebrate Easter other than in our church with others from our community and congregation, or on the shore or beach at sunrise, or on a hilltop at dawn, we celebrate Jesus rising from death in a way that you and I could never have imagined. I can hardly believe it, is perhaps what you think this morning about celebrating Easter this way; and that might well have been exactly the thought and the words of those who discovered the empty tomb. I can’t believe it!

We’ve just read about Mary Magdalene and the other Mary coming to Jesus’ tomb at dawn and witnessing an angel rolling back the stone which sealed it. There had been a crowd when Jesus entered Jerusalem in the palm procession a week ago, and again to jeer when he was condemned to death, but the Gospels tell us that the first witnesses to the resurrection were ones or twos. One person mistaking the risen Jesus for the gardener, two walking to Emmaus who did not recognise the stranger accompanying them, a few women at the tomb, and the eleven disciples self-isolating in a locked room. These were not public gatherings and there was no large congregation as we would call it.

These were people feeling confused and fearful, unsure about the future, worried that what they had so enjoyed and come to know as normal in being with Jesus in his ministry would ever return.

This Easter I feel closer to those first witnesses than usual. The Easter news of hope came first to individuals and small groups who were anxious and uncertain, as we may be, who received the surprising news of resurrection as an unexpected joy and hope in adversity.

God’s gift is hope and life. God has never promised grand or uplifting worship, nor full churches, a constantly growing economy, guaranteed good health and the fulfilment of our dreams. God promises today life and hope.

And God promises to be present with us – always. Whatever, God is with us. That’s at the centre of this Easter celebration as, actually, it’s at the heart of our celebrations of Christmas, Ascension and Pentecost too. Each tell us that God acts in order to ensure his constant presence, always and eternally. As Christmas make the ‘general’ point that God is born into our world and through Jesus is ‘God with us’, so Good Friday and Easter Day make the more specific one that God is present with us especially when we need God most – in distress, hardship, suffering, pain, loss and death. Jesus, quoting a psalm, cries out to God, why have you forsaken me?, and this morning we know categorically that he hadn’t.

Finally, we notice that the angel tells the women at the empty tomb, “He is not here.” The risen Jesus could not be contained in the tomb nor in our buildings, our liturgies, music and decorated churches. He was no longer in the tomb but alive in the world, which is where he meets us as he met those ones and twos of whom we read in the Gospels.

Those small groups transformed the world with the news of resurrection, life and hope.