

Sermon preached on Easter Day, 8 April 2012 in Portsmouth Cathedral

"Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him so that he might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation." (Isaiah 25: 9)

Mary Magdalene, Mary mother of James, and Salome were first alarmed at what they discovered inside the tomb early that morning. Then as we read they fled in terror and amazement because they were afraid. The other gospels give us further examples too of the astonishment, terror, incredulity and perplexity experienced by the disciples as they were confronted by an empty tomb or by an encounter by the risen Jesus.

Where I grew up it was on Good Friday the churches were fullest as I recall, but perhaps less so now. I noticed with some interest on Friday that BBC radio 4 Today programme predominately described the day as Holiday Friday. We come today, in Easter joy and thanksgiving, however we have kept this last week from Palm Sunday through Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and the dereliction of yesterday – for Holy Saturday is a void in the shadow of the ugly events of Good Friday – knowing that this glorious day owes its power both to its continuity and discontinuity with the events and ministry of Jesus. His life began pushed out to the margins in a makeshift delivery room, because there was no space in an Inn in Bethlehem, and ends equally unpleasantly outside the city walls of Jerusalem on a cross with bandits. Though Jesus' death was in keeping with his birth, Easter celebrates what was utterly unexpected and perplexing.

We cannot recapture emotions we do not have or relive experiences we have not known. We have grown accustomed to associating Easter with chickens hatching and Easter bunnies. Though I am sympathetic to the plight of the preacher or teacher trying to communicate the heart of the Easter gospel, especially to young people – because I have done it myself often enough over the years – but we have to assert that ultimately this does not do justice to the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. The resurrection is unnatural, entirely inexplicable, and outside the normal course of events. No wonder the first disciples were amazed and dumbfounded. The resurrection was a Victor Meldrew moment. "I don't believe it!" might have been the words and thoughts of the disciples as well as the late Richard Wilson in 'One Foot in the Grave.'

Unexpected, unnatural, world changing. We have prayed in the Collect to God "who overcame the old order of sin and death to make all things new in Christ." The new order stands in contrast, in discontinuity to all that put Jesus on the cross. The resurrection so overwhelmed those first disciples because it confounded all that had seemed to triumph; hatred, violence and selfishness.

It is with that understanding of what God intends, makes possible, and vindicates in Jesus' resurrection, that we celebrate Easter with joy and hope.

Inevitably Easter challenges much in our communities, society, and world that we assume is how it simply is just as surely as the events of the first Easter morning completely altered Mary Magdalene's, Peter's and the others view of what was given and unchangeable.

Their lives were radically renewed, and ours are too. All through Holy Week we have known that the odds were stacked against Jesus and overwhelming in favour of vindictive injustice and barbaric cruelty. As we have walked with Jesus there are perhaps only a couple of people who marginally offered Jesus some compassion or support. Alongside the plotting and rabble rousing of the chief priest, the tortured weakness of Pilate, and their combined self interested advantage in removing Jesus, only Simon of Cyrene (obliged to help carry the cross) and Joseph of Aramathea (donating a tomb for burial) emerge with any credit.

What is vindicated today, quite clearly, is the qualities, attitudes, integrity and generosity of Jesus himself. The message could not be starker or more clear or of any deeper significance. It changes our world view by making it transparently clear what is God's will and way for his world and his people. There is today continuity between Jesus' life and God's raising of him from dead.

When Pilot asked for something to substantiate the high priest's arrest of Jesus, the crowd replies "If this man were not a criminal we would not have handed him over to you", presuming that their assertion and opinion determines his fate. The baying of the crowd and sometimes of our redtop newspapers have a familiarly similar style, assuming guilt and presuming to speak in the general public interest. Easter indicates that muscle in the public square must not have the final word.

When Jesus declines to answer Pilot's question, "Are you the king of the Jews?" Pilot assumes that identity is culturally and nationally conditioned. "Your own nation and the chief priest have handed you over to me." And we jump to conclusions, assume stereotypes – the French, the toffs, those on benefits, the bankers, and even bishops. Easter indicates that who Jesus is is defined not in such easy and cavalier ways, and our identities are found not by association or assumption but in relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

The new Easter order stands in contrast to all that drove Jesus to the cross because the resurrection confirms gloriously all that Jesus is and did. The new Easter way is based on kingdom values and qualities in contrast to the old order with its bent and twisted priorities.

Easter Day, and the season which begins, enable us, pared back by the Lenten seasons abstinence to renew our commitment to live the faith into which we are baptised and to embrace its kingdom focus. We do this with absolute clarity today about what Easter celebrates. We know what Jesus said and did, and just as importantly about how he spoke and worked with integrity, compassion, generosity and thoughtfulness even when challenged by manipulation, scheming, opposition and lying. That way of life is dramatically endorsed today for parts of our lives it will come, if we are honest, as something of a warning, but most of all we greet today with rejoicing because that is how we are made to be and how we want to live our lives.

The risen Jesus bore the wounds of the cross. Our lives show too the wounds of the old order, but he and we live confident that God not only gives hope, he transforms. The old order has gone, the new is come. Alleluia

+Christopher