**Sermon by the Bishop of Portsmouth**

**Easter Day 2021**

*Readings Acts 10:34-43*

*1 Corinthians 15:1-11*

*John 20: 1-18*

When will things return to normal? Will we soon be able to go back to the way things were? These are perfectly understandable questions about the so-called road map out of lockdown. In a very different context, the disciples were turning over the same sorts of questions in their minds on Easter morning. When can we go back to the sort of life we had before that Jesus changed everything? Now that he is dead, how do we go back to the way things were, less disruption, fewer run-ins with the authorities, no more stories that made us feel just a bit uncomfortable? Perhaps there was a longing for a quiet life with comfort found in everyday familiarities. Certainly we may long for the ability to shop without a face covering (and worship without one too), hug a loved one, make a visit on the spur of the moment, have a drink in our favourite café or pub. When will things return to normal?

It was not long after the crucifixion that the disciples discovered that there was to be no return to anything like they had previously known. No return to life before Jesus, no going back to the BC era, and no return to life with him on the highways and byways of Galilee. Easter is not a return to a former state, there is no return to the way things used to be, it is not a going back. The risen Christ still bears the marks of the cross in his hands, his feet, and his side. It is by these wounds that Thomas for one will come to know him, come to believe, and to know that he is in the presence of the risen Christ.

We know only too well that the painful marks of Covid have changed some things for ever. There may be some patterns of our common life that return to the way they once were, but at a deeper level we are perhaps all more alert to the fragility not only of human life but of the international order. That is a fragility that is all too obvious as countries wrestle with enabling access to vaccines. Sadly, we see a glimpse of how things may get worse; territorial considerations that will be used to determine, or not, trade, aid, and relationships. A depressing nationalism of health emerges almost as if the most vulnerable, the poorest, have less need for a vaccine, and that their health is no concern of ours. But under all of the political posturing, and sometimes of misplaced selfishness, there is, I think, a greater awareness of vulnerability, of human weakness, of the value of human life. When much of what we take for granted comes to a shuddering halt you simply have to face up to the fact that you see the world in a different way.

Mary Magdalene knew what it was for her world to come to a shuddering halt, in that way that grief pulls us all up short. She saw things very, very differently. She saw the one in whom she had invested everything, the one who had invested in her his love and his mercy. And then, everything changed. Nothing is ever as it seems through the resurrection and gradually Mary, and Peter, and the other disciples, and then the others, and Thomas, and more and more were to discover that as gradually in different ways he called each of them by name. With their own name they were called into the community of the resurrection. He has gone on calling ever since. Unlike Covid, which we hope will be a thing of the past, the resurrection is very much a thing of the present that enables us to face up to reality of this and every moment.

The New Testament accounts of what happened next, along with the narratives through the history of the Church, make clear to us there is no return to a former way of life. There is a new way of life. And that of course is true for each person who encounters Jesus. It matters not whether you are a first-generation Mary, or here in Portsmouth in 2021, or sitting on home today with your phone; he still he calls by name. The resurrection has lost none of its power to change things.

Our roadmap out of lockdown will be on a longer time frame and raises more important issues than the lifting of the last restrictions. There are deeper, more profound questions than ‘When can we sing again’ or when can I stop wearing my mask?’ There are questions to be asked about the global sharing of resources, the care we give to the sacred nature of human life, the honour we give to human fragility amid the robust debate of national political discourse. That is now the context in which we must proclaim the resurrection. We are not offering a return to the ways things were, we are offering the medicine for broken hearts and fractured communities. Today we are given absolute assurance of being given sufficient grace for the task.

And the new normal? Well, proclaim it with joy and boldness – for now resurrection is the norm.

Life with the risen Christ is unpredictable, but consistent in that it is infused with love.

Life with the risen Christ is a risk, but is the ultimate assurance of new life.

Life with the risen Christ is routine, only in that there is constant forgiveness.

The resurrection offers to a fragile world, to a rather nervous society, and to human hearts not mere optimism, but absolute rock-solid hope that sustains and equips us, made in the image of God.

So, what can we say? We say, Alleluia! Christ is risen. He is risen indeed, Alleluia!

And we turn to the new normality, of hearing the call of our name by the risen Jesus, the living God.