

Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 4th April 2021
Easter Sunday – 8 am service

Collect

God of glory,
by the raising of your Son
you have broken the chains of death and hell:
fill your Church with faith and hope;
for a new day has dawned
and the way to life stands open
in our Saviour Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Acts 10:34-43

Then Peter began to speak to them: 'I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.'

John 20:1-18

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.' Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went towards the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' She said to them, 'They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.' When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her,

'Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?' Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.' Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabbouni!' (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, 'Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."' ' Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

Sermon by John Richardson

A few years ago I took a service on Good Friday at Stoke D'Abernon church. It's a beautiful setting on the banks of the River Mole.

At the end of the service we gathered outside the church around a large cross to await the striking of the church clock at three o'clock - the time Jesus dies on the cross.

It was a beautiful day - sunny, warm, quiet and still, with few sounds except the birds singing in the trees. It was peaceful - but it shouldn't have been. We were there to recall a terrible event - the death of an innocent man on a cross.

In the stillness of that Good Friday afternoon I began to realise that it wasn't that peaceful after all. Every few minutes another aircraft passed overhead on its way to Heathrow - it's passengers oblivious to what was going on below. And the more you listened the more you became aware of another intrusion - in the distance was the constant drone and rumble of traffic on the M25, barely a half mile away.

An intrusion - but a reminder that as we stood there around the cross, there was a world out there carrying on as usual. This is the world to which Jesus came: not an ideal, imaginary world of our making, but a world full of noise and clamour and distraction. A world which is so often characterised not by peace and tranquillity, but by pain and suffering, anger and resentment. A world, in fact, not so very different from the one that existed on the first Good Friday - one that brought about the suffering and death of Jesus on the cross.

Last Monday was another beautiful day. But it was also a sad day. I listened to the lunchtime news and heard of the terrible events taking place in Mozambique - more suffering, more cruelty, more senseless killing, more violence. If we are not careful, we see this as yet another intrusion into the relative peace and tranquility of our own lives.

But we must not regard such things as an intrusion. We should see them as a reminder that we live in a far from perfect world - a world so often characterised by hatred, greed, indifference: a world to which Jesus came to show us that things can be different.

Good Friday brings to mind the very worst side of our human nature. There may be good reason to be downcast, yet the amazing thing is that in the places of the most acute suffering we often glimpse the glory. In our darkest moments we are filled once more with hope.

So what of Easter Day? How do we get from a world of suffering and death to a world of hope and love?

There is an ancient Jewish saying which goes like this:

At the last judgement

God will bring you into his presence one by one;

and there he will tell you

what your life was really about.

Then you will understand the good that you did, and the bad.

And the good you did will be heaven,

and the bad you did will be hell:
and then God will forgive you.

There we have the meaning of the cross.
How do we get from there to the empty tomb?

The final words of that Jewish saying give us a clue: "...and then God will forgive you." No matter what we have been; no matter what we have done; no matter how much we feel we have failed ourselves and each other; no matter how many times we have forgotten the word "love", God will forgive us.

And that is the link between Good Friday and Easter Day. Evil may bring about Good Friday. Love brings about Easter Day. The machinations of wicked people who are filled with hatred bring about the events of Good Friday. The act of a loving God brings about the events of Easter Day. We see what human beings are capable of. We see what God is capable of.

Out of the darkness of grief and sorrow comes joy and hope and new life. An assurance is given that nothing that can happen to us, nothing we can do to ourselves or to others, no failure is too great; nothing can separate us from the love and mercy and forgiveness of God. Nor can it separate us from each other.

Which means we are, as someone once said, Easter people living in a Good Friday world. Which means we cannot escape from the world we have made. What we can do is catch a glimpse of the world God has made, and through the love and mercy of God become part of that world.

The Welsh poet/ priest R S Thomas struggled with the empty tomb and the whole idea of resurrection, just as we do. What can he say? He is bereft, for there appears to be nothing to hold on to: all is lost. He felt as did the first disciples. That after Good Friday there is nothing but emptiness, grief, sorrow, loss. And yet he sees the empty tomb as a call the faith. And that, at the end of they, is what Easter is all about. For Thomas, there was only one way he could say this, and that was in a poem. Here it is: it's called "Easter: I approach."

But here, true to my name,
I have nothing to hold on to,
an absence so much richer than a presence,
offering instead of the skull's leer
an impalpable possibility
for faith's fingertips to explore.