

**Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> April 2022**  
**Easter Sunday – Service of Light**

**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.

**Romans 6:3-11**

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For whoever has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

**Luke 24:1-12**

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, [the women] came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, 'Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.' Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

## Sermon

This morning's service is one of my favourite of the year. It is full of symbolism as we light the Paschal Candle as a sign that death has been overcome. We renew our baptismal vows, recognising our shared identity as children of God – an identity that reminds us of our need of God, and just as importantly of one another. We rejoice with loud, joyful music, singing our praises to God with alleluias and glorias which have been banished during Lent.

I also love the fact that the Easter vigil is one of those services that has the capacity to bring its surprises. We begin the service at the same time each year, but because Easter is a movable feast, the level of light can be very different, which changes the atmosphere quite significantly. As, of course, does the good old British weather. There have been years when the wind has meant I have had to take care not to set myself alight as the fire has been lit. And keeping the flame of the Paschal candle lit in a howling gale isn't at all easy.

The reason I cherish these challenges is that they remind us that sometimes life just doesn't quite go to plan. And that some things are simply beyond our control.

As we celebrate the Easter feast this year, we do so in challenging circumstances. Many of us would not have expected to see a war in Europe, and yet that has been the reality of 2022. A nation under attack; people fleeing from the violence; neighbouring states struggling to cope with the numbers of refugees seeking safe haven. And in our own country rising prices bringing poverty to many individuals and families.

We might be forgiven for asking ourselves where we might find the hope in all this.

We can perhaps begin to find an answer to this challenging question by digging deeply into the resurrection stories in each of the gospels. If you can find time today – or indeed over the coming days – do go away and read each one of the resurrection accounts. Each is slightly different. Each one is full of a strange mixture of emotions – there is of course joy, but there's also fear, perplexity, frustration, anger even, amongst Jesus's followers. And somehow, by digging a little deeper and exploring those emotions, I think perhaps we find ourselves encountering something of the hope of Easter.

The reading that we have just heard is Luke's account, which begins with the women. They have been preparing spices for Jesus's body, and head down to the tomb. When they arrive, they find that the stone has been rolled away, and there is no body. At this point they are perplexed, but their confusion turns to terror when two men in dazzling clothes appear and speak to them. They return and decide to tell the eleven disciples what has happened, but they aren't believed. All except Peter consider it an idle tale. Peter, by contrast, rushes to the tomb, discovers the linen cloth, and is amazed.

What are we supposed to make of this story? So far, it is far from triumphant. It contains a range of reactions and emotions. If, like me, you're a lover of the romantic comedy, where all the loose ends are tied up and everyone lives happily ever after, this is hardly a satisfactory ending.

And it is perhaps for this very reason that it really does have the capacity to offer hope. Because, as I have already suggested, the world that we are living in is not just about happy endings. It is complex

and indeed perplexing. And it is only by acknowledging these things and recognising the way the Easter story speaks into them that we have any real possibility of discovering real hope.

During the meditations on Good Friday, I focused on a number of the characters of Holy Week: Peter; Herod and Pilate; the criminals crucified alongside Jesus; and Mary, the mother of Jesus. During each of those meditations, I found myself seeking to understand a little better the motivations and emotions of each of those characters. Of course in large part it was an act of the imagination, since the evidence that we have is limited. Nevertheless, human emotions are one of the things that can unite us, and it is surely legitimate to seek to make sense of each character's encounters with Jesus.

As I tried to make sense of each character, I found myself wanting to understand how Jesus would have felt about each one. Where we have evidence, one thing is clear. Jesus never gave up on anyone. He says as much to the criminal being crucified alongside him – "today you will be with me in paradise." It's hard to imagine anything closer to the eleventh hour, and yet the criminal acknowledges his wrongdoing and recognises that Jesus has done no wrong. Nothing more is required. Jesus's love is enough.

That's something which becomes especially clear as we see how Peter responds in this morning's reading. When we left him on Good Friday, he was weeping bitterly, having denied Jesus three times. We have walked alongside Peter for long enough in the scriptures to know that he has his ups and downs. That he sometimes sees things with great clarity; and sometimes doesn't get it at all. It's hard to imagine that this will change. And yet Jesus never sees Peter's personality as a barrier. He never gives up on Peter, no matter how low he feels that he has fallen. Jesus's love is strong enough to work through each one of us in all our glorious humanity. And in this morning's reading we see that Peter is the one who runs to the tomb, believing what the women have said, and staring in amazement at the empty tomb.

So the first thing that our Easter hope consists in is the fact that it is never too late. That God's love is always strong enough, no matter where we have gone wrong.

And if that's the first, the second is that small things really do matter. Just look at the women preparing the spices to tend to Jesus's body. They have no real idea what to do in the face of such tragedy, but they do something. And what they do matters. We can perhaps imagine countless other small acts of kindness going on throughout the world, indeed we see examples on our TV screens even in the midst of the horrors of warfare, each one making a difference to individual lives. Each one reminding us that God's love has a strength and endurance that cannot be extinguished.

And if those are the first two signs of hope, it is the third that perhaps brings them together. If we remember that it is never too late – and that God's love can work through our imperfections – and we try to do those small things that can make a difference, then our relationship with God will grow and deepen. And, just like Peter as he runs to the tomb when all his friends refuse to believe the women, we will find that somehow our lives really are being transformed. Not necessarily all at once. Not to the exclusion of challenges. But somehow, deep down, we will find ourselves connecting with the love that we find in God that simply cannot be contained but bursts out of the tomb on Easter morning, and can burst into our hearts, too.

Amen