**
Isaiah 25.6-9
Mark 16.1-8
4th April 2021 Easter Day

 Resurrection – A Defiance of Hopelessness**

Minister: Let the words of my mouth
**All: And the meditations of all our hearts**
Minister: Be acceptable in your sight
**All: O Lord, our rock, and our redeemer. Amen**

The story goes that upon his return to Britain in the 1970’s, a well-known Bishop who had spent decades overseas serving in India was asked by a newspaper how Britain had changed. His answer was that he felt that in this country there was now a loss of hope.

Hope is such a little word, yet it describes something so vital and precious for us all.

And hope is undoubtedly a central theme on any Easter Sunday.

Yet it all began that day in such a fragile way. So much so that, come its end at sunset, the disciples were still huddled behind closed doors. And that sense of insecurity and fear never really left them until Pentecost, fifty days later. Today, in some ways, I suspect, we still sing alleluia a little early.

But it really isn’t surprising that even after the resurrection hope took some time to take root.

The early followers of Jesus, the ones who had suffered so much trauma alongside him, had just gone through injustice, defeat, brokenness, failure and even death. That Holy Week litany was guaranteed to bring them a certain sense of disorientation.

A couple of weeks ago I was on a Zoom call alongside a dozen or so ministerial colleagues. We were discussing church life, and some were clearly anxious by what, they suspected, is the consequent lack of momentum, post pandemic, that is now apparent in many churches. One minister even went as far as saying he felt his whole leadership team had, and these were his words: *lost their vision.*

I was impressed that, at this point, the Regional Minister who was hosting the Zoom call jumped in and gently, yet firmly, made the point that, in his view, our role now might most helpfully be one of trying to understand the trauma through which every congregation has gone over these last thirteen months. Not to criticise that fragility but rather to empathise with it. Wise words.

All of us feel disorientated at the moment. We are trying to find our way back, yet none of us is quite the same person we were when this unsettling journey began. We know there is hope and on Easter Day what better time than this to affirm we are travelling towards the light. Yet, just like those disciples in the original story, either physically or psychologically, we too can find ourselves behind the doors we first bolted closed last March.

Our hope is certainly fragile. Yet, as we today celebrate the empty tomb and the dawn of Easter Day, I think we also want to affirm this hope is real, even transformative.

Now, some may scoff at that and think this resurrection faith that is central to any church’s life like ours, is deluded. But the hope of this particular Sunday has a context which makes it anything but naïve.

One of the most precious aspects of our Church calendar is this annual long weekend which puts all of life into perspective because it contains three days which encapsulate all life: Good Friday, Holy Saturday and only then Easter Sunday. To have only Friday would make us permanently depressed. To have only Saturday would make us incredibly frustrated. And to have only Sunday would, indeed induce in us a naïve optimism. Yet, with such wisdom, the narrative gives us all three days.

So, to live as Easter Morning people is never to deny the reality of all the Good Fridays of our lives. We are not meant to deny, ignore, or underestimate the pain of life, of parting, of suffering or of wondering. That’s why, as we ever so slowly emerge from Pandemic, our response could never exclusively be thanksgiving for a vaccine but also lament for all, and everyone, we have lost.

Good Friday was only two days ago. No one recovers from trauma in two days. The disciples certainly didn’t and even at dawn in the garden the memory of Calvary was still too fresh and raw to be ignored.

As someone I read this week puts it: *You don’t seek peace by denying the pain of life but by facing and owning it.* The disciples ultimately had to do that as they looked at the cross because, we suspect, some of them like Peter and Andrew ended up dying on one.

Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury, talks about this in his latest book *Re-imagining Britain*. He is clearly a great believer in the power of hope, yet he also advocates that we speak honestly when things go wrong. He speaks of the vain optimism we might have had in the markets before the 2008 financial crash, the false confidence in some building regulations before the Grenfell Tower fire, or the idea that we have come as far as is possible as a compassionate society even though we have a growing crisis in elderly care provision.

The archbishop’s book isn’t politically sectarian or depressing. He just makes the point that real, Godly hope isn’t based on a Pollyanna optimism that ignores the realities around us by brushing them under the carpet but sees life, with all its challenges as it truly is and defies the idea that it cannot change. Hope looks Good Friday in the eye and declares *This is not the end.* Hope believes in transformation.

There is a lot of talk now of facing the future by *Building Better.* Some have already thought about what that might mean. A poll published last week said that 38% of those questioned hoped that after all restrictions are lifted, they will permanently make more time to be with, or talk to, their family. We surely applaud such a good intention, one that has emerged from the reality we faced in the recent wilderness of isolation.

And then there has been that unexpected interest in Christian spirituality with churches experiencing many more tuning into their Zoom services than was expected. Or how about the rise of 30% in viewing figures for Songs of Praise during the Pandemic.

Now, in today’s Easter Gospel there is this very significant statement given to the women as they enter the tomb from the young man dressed in white. He passes on the instructions of Jesus to his disciples, post Easter, that they return to Galilee and meet him there.

Why Galilee? Why make them trek north? Why not reassemble with them in Bethany?

Well, isn’t it because most of Jesus’ ministry of compassion and reaching out to the poor and the marginalised was up in Galilee.

So, this return to Galilee is a return to this sort of mission. And that is a vital part of our understanding of resurrection. This wasn’t a resurrection to something new as much as it was an affirmation of something old, but now with new hope.

That ministry of Jesus in Galilee of meeting the outcasts with practical acceptance, of honouring children and welcoming women. This breaking in of God’s Kingdom with compassion was not snuffed out on Good Friday.

The Passion Narrative tells the story of a coalition of civic and religious power than tried to snuff it out. And how this Jesus defied that sense of hopelessness. How he died upon a cross giving up his own life rather than betraying all those he had ministered to so compassionately in Galilee. And how, after the waiting of Holy Saturday, there came the resurrection of Easter Day which, in the words of Desmond Tutu, meant that

*Goodness is stronger than evil;
Love is stronger than hate;
Light is stronger than darkness;
And Life is stronger than death.*Go back to Galilee. It was a summons in code. It meant this breaking in of God’s compassionate kingdom has not stopped because of Good Friday. There has been a resurrection. Return to this old mission with new and deeper hope. That was the clarion call from inside the empty tomb. Let the hope-filled work of transformation continue. Go back to Galilee.

Of course, the disciples couldn’t do this alone. That task, their task, and consequently, our task is too big for us.

Much of the Gospel of Mark is about their limitations. Jesus gathered around him characters that we have grown to love and identify with. We quickly turned them into apostles and saints and named our churches after them. Yet says Mark they constantly underperformed.

They didn’t understand Jesus’ teaching to the extent that he even had to explain the parables to them. They fought over who might have a place at heaven’s top table. The failed to see the mission opportunities presented by, say, a hungry crowd of 5000. And in that horrendous last week in Jerusalem this band of brothers was blown apart by betrayal, denial, and abandonment.

And yet, in fifty days’ time, at Pentecost, this group would be blessed and gifted with the ultimate hope of Jesus’ resurrected Spirit filling and enabling them to face God Friday, live through Holy Saturday and be inspired by Easter Sunday for the rest of their lives. And their story and experience has become our inheritance and experience today. We too feel our inadequacies, yet we have this ultimate hope in Jesus’ resurrection.

Now, I want to end this talk, if you’ll excuse this tortuous link, by talking about endings.

Mark’s Gospel has a famously odd ending. In the church bibles there is an asterisk halfway through verse 8. It’s where the earliest manuscripts bring the story to a close and it’s uncomfortably abrupt. So uncomfortable, in fact, that its sometimes thought the early Christians, not Mark but those who followed him, felt compelled to add a few more verses which put everyone in a better light and gave the gospel a more dignified cadence.

In what might have been Mark’s original, after years of Jesus telling everyone to keep quiet and them speaking, at the resurrection those who discovered the empty tomb were commissioned to speak about it but perversely kept quiet.

So, a longer ending was added that tidied everything up. The women pass on the message and the Galilean encounter with the risen Jesus takes place.

Millions of words have been written by scholars about the possible endings of Mark.

Yet, perhaps it would be good for us to accept the shorter ending this morning, even, and actually because it feel incomplete.

Throughout Lent the BBC in both their daily and Sunday services have been seeking to use the Ignatian spiritual tradition of living in these gospel stories. Well, what does it mean for us to live in Mark’s story? Perhaps, instead of the using the longer ending, we could complete the story.

In fact, isn’t that what we are called to do every day, to live this new day and to face this new challenge in the light of the resurrection story.

As the Pandemic subsides, we too are called to go back to Galilee. We will have changed, and maybe there will be some things we can no longer do, or we’ll do them differently, but the call of resurrection is to return to this mission of compassion with renewed and deepened hope. To live in the story, to complete it and make it ours.

On Easter Day we consciously and determinedly make the decision to believe in hope, the resurrection hope of Jesus as we affirm once more that:

Christ has died
Christ is risen and everyday
Christ comes again.

May it be so, as with God’s help we live out and finish the story that began that day at dawn in a garden. Amen

*Ian Green, Amersham, 25th March 2021.*