**31st March 2024 Easter Day**Isaiah 25.6-9 O.T. p.587
 John 20.1-18 N.T. p98 **Theology from Waitrose**

Well, I never thought I’d be quoting Waitrose in church. Yet this year they’ve teamed up with Saatchi and Saatchi and have come up with a poster that caught my eye as I was passing Little Waitrose in Sycamore Road during Lent. It says: *Easter – where the good stuff is.*
Of course, they meant stuff like chocolate and hot crossed buns, yet here in church on a day such as this I want to shout out *Yes!* Easter is about love, light and life – so thank you Waitrose, I agree: Easter – it’s where the good stuff is.

It's been a long winter in so many ways. Age old divisions dog our world and yet we never seem to learn from the past. We are told more countries will hold elections in this calendar year than ever before and yet hope and trust in politicians is in short supply.

Perhaps it is true when they say children smile 300 times a day but adults only 47.

Easter speaks into a moment in time which reflects so many of our moments. None of the disciples were smiling as Easter Day dawned. Hope seemed to die on Good Friday and now in their grief those who loved Jesus just seemed to be going through the motions.

Into the exhaustion that Holy Week had brought, the Resurrection brings life.
Into the horror that Good Friday’s cruelty had shown, the Resurrection brings love.
Into the desolation felt at the garden tomb, Resurrection now brings hope.

At least 300 reasons, then, for adults, as well as children to smile on Easter day.

Let’s recall two of the encounters recorded for us in the gospels from that first Easter Sunday.

The first is at dawn, and at first Mary thought it was an encounter with the gardener.

She is enveloped by sadness and overcome with grief. Mary is like any of us when we are bereaved. Suddenly our world is changed, yet we feel we belong more to the one we’ve left behind than the one we’ve now entered. So, she has a conversation, but she is hardly present in the flow of words. Initially they wash over her because her heart isn’t in the dialogue. Mary is just so very, very sad.

Easter Day doesn’t start in the bible with a flourish of trumpets but with people quietly bearing their grief. These people come across with dignity and as we read their story we empathise with them.

And today, what sort of people would we be if we didn’t spare a thought for our neighbours in Ukraine and Russia, Gaza and Israel, for Syria where now no child 12 years old and under can remember living in peace, or for the citizens of Sudan who since 2023 have been in civil war, with half the population unemployed and 6 million citizens internally displaced.

No preacher from any pulpit, no imam in any prayer hall, or rabbi preaching in any synagogue can advocate a simple strategy to cure these ills between human beings, even on Easter Day.

But this story of Mary in the garden from our own tradition does, I believe, give us the basis of hope.

The gardener uses one word which changes the situation and relationship between them, he uses her name. Mary, he says. And she says, Rabboni, meaning Master.

At that moment a deep kindness infuses a world of tears. And it brings with it a warm humanity and wonderful dignity that is utterly transformative.

The Bible, in passages held dear by both Jews and Christians, speaks of a God who *calls us by name.* What a great thought. I am given a certain intrinsic dignity when called by my name. And when God, my family, my church and my community calls me by name, I feel loved and valued.

God calls Nikolai in Russia, Petro in Ukraine, Fatima in Palestine, Golda in Israel, Mustafa in Sudan and Abdul in Syria by name. And if we can, and if they can, call each other by our names – then there is the beginning of hope based on a kindness that always sees that those with whom we share this world have a name, just like us.

Now, the second Easter encounter that draws my eye this morning is the one that occurred as the sun set on that tumultuous day, the meeting between the risen Jesus and his disciples both on the journey to, and at, Emmaus.

It's a much loved story about a journey and can become, for us, a picture about our journey; our journey through life and our journey of faith.

Jesus, although for some reason he appears to be incognito, becomes a fellow traveller with Cleopas and an unnamed disciple as they walk to Emmaus on the evening of Easter Day. They are worn and weary travellers whose every step seems anxious and uncertain. They are understandably traumatised by the drama of the last week that has shattered their hopes and confused their identity. It must have all felt overwhelmingly complex.

Life often is. We may long for a certain simplicity, yet events and circumstances constantly make life complicated.

I also love the comforting busy-ness that is found in the story. The act of walking I sense is central to the narrative.

We are not sure where Emmaus actually was. This encounter is mentioned in both Luke and Mark, yet the town Emmaus, literally meaning *Hot Springs* is only named in Luke. Various manuscripts give various distances between it and Jerusalem, so pin pointing where it was isn’t straight forward. The most common understanding is to think of it as a town about 8 miles west of Jerusalem. So, a good, hearty evening walk for people used to travelling everywhere by foot.

And when we are anxious or confused, we do sometimes like to walk. The rhythm helps, getting out and seeing different scenery helps. Just doing something other than sitting helps. And Jesus becomes their enigmatic companion and joins them on their evening journey as they walk west and catch the setting sun.

I suspect like many of you, I grew up attending afternoon Sunday School at which we sang Scripture Union choruses. I remember one with a particularly rousing tune, *He lives, he lives, Christ Jesus lives today.* It’s the next line that resonates with me this morning, half a century on, *he walks with me, he talks with me, along life’s narrow way.*I realise now that Sunday School chorus comes from a longer hymn, by the American Presbyterian minister, A.H.Ackley, who wrote gospel hymns for the evangelist, Billy Sunday, and its first line goes: *I serve a risen Saviour, he’s in the world today…*
And that, in a way, sums up these two Easter encounters. As the sun rose, Jesus talks to Mary. As the sun sets, Jesus walks with Cleopas and his friend.

So, on this eight mile journey many words were spoken. The confused disciples poured out their questions and, it seems, unphased and unhurried, their mysterious walking companion brought them a such a sense of peace and perspective that, in hindsight, they described their hearts as having been warmed as they walked with him.

Generally talking is often good, and we do a fair amount of it here in church. It’s good to explore faith together because an informed faith, fashioned not just by our own thoughts and experiences but by those of scholars, neighbours and friends, is inevitably a deeper and more rounded faith. And our prayer is, surely, that God speaks, whispers or maybe even shouts at times, through the words of preachers or fellow companions. Talking, listening, dialoguing – that’s the way faith is often nurtured.

And yet, thrillingly I think, the Emmaus encounter presents another way too. Cleopas and his friend invite their mysterious fellow traveller to share supper with them once at Emmaus. As their guest he is requested to give a blessing before the meal. And it was as he broke the bread, in that deeply symbolic action, a mealtime sacrament, that they appreciated the living presence of the resurrected Lord.

What a beautifully profound and moving moment. In the breaking of bread, they knew Jesus.

Symbols, actions, sacrament, mystery – they are all part of an Easter faith, along with words, hymns, prayers and acclamations. Personally, I am grateful for both the words and symbols that inform and describe faith. I value today’s opportunity to say *Christ is Risen.* And I treasure the sacrament of broken bread as symbol of self-giving love.

In the story of Emmaus we encounter a wonderful combination of words and symbols, and our hearts are once again warmed within us.

So, thank you Waitrose for your theology, Easter truly is where we find the good stuff. In our faith tradition it is the red-letter day of the year.

In my Sunday School days, I sang with a juvenile enthusiasm: *He lives, he lives, Christ Jesus lives today.*
In my adult years I willingly and wholehearted reaffirm those words with that ancient acclamation that has come down to us through the centuries:

*Christ is Risen.
He is risen indeed, Alleluia!*

Thanks be to God. Amen

*Ian Green, Amersham, 29th March 2024*