

Easter Day

Earlier in the service we said: Christ is risen – to which you responded - He is risen indeed. Alleluia.

This is the great, triumphant cry of the Church. However, as the gospel writer Luke tells it on that first day of the week following the crucifixion, it was not so clear, bold and forthright. Yes, there was an empty tomb. But this was not as the women expected. There was a mysterious intersection between heaven and earth - a couple of angels. But did that then mean Jesus actually had risen. Certainly these women could not say at that point: “he had risen indeed”, let alone rejoice. And for us, some just may not have that confidence to assert boldly: Jesus has risen, he is risen indeed. What is actually a resurrection?

I think the story of that day as told by Luke helps.

The Melbourne biblical scholar, Brendan Byrne says of this account, that the community of faith only comes to full knowledge, faith and understanding (about the resurrection) when individuals and groups bring together and share their previously separate stories. Somewhat surprisingly Byrne says “faith in the resurrection requires a lot more than the discovery of an empty tomb”. (Byrne, *The Hospitality of God* 186) So how should we understand that day? What can we believe in, when it comes to this core statement of the Christian faith, that “in Christ there is new life,” or “we are not to look for the living among the dead”, to quote the angels that first Easter morn.

The answer is that understanding does not just happen in a blinding flash – even for those around Jesus at the time. The truth of Easter is revealed haltingly. It begins in confusion and puzzlement, even fear. But when the various bits and pieces of the story are shared **in community** – pieced together - we then begin to see more clearly this holy mystery: Christ is no longer dead, but alive. We see new life and not a death: death loses its sting.

Now this particular communal insight as to the meaning of the resurrection is very much a Luke thing. Luke, in several ways tells the Easter story differently to the other accounts.

To begin with, there seem to be more women in Luke than in the other gospels. After naming three women – who are different to the other gospels – there is added the phrase “the other women with them”. The fact is there was a large group of women involved are contrasted over against the seeming insiders – the group of (male) disciples. The women begin to understand – the men, except for Peter, don’t get it. So in the story the women are frightened by the two angels guarding the empty tomb. Now we should note here that Luke actually uses this word “tomb”. Other accounts use, for example, sepulchre. So why is that important? Well in the Greek the word “mnemeion”, is translated as tomb. It is the root form of the word “remember” (our word amnesia is not to have memory.) This is sort of logical: a tomb is where you remember – it is a memorial. One remembers someone who has died. Luke has these two mystery men say at this tomb “Remember how he, Jesus, 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.” At this place of memories they remember something said in the past about about the future. Ah! He is not dead! Parts of the jigsaw begin to come together.

So they race off to see the “eleven **and all the rest**”: all those males. But their story doesn’t wash. It was for them just “an idle tale and they did not believe them”. However, Peter is still curious enough

and comes and to look for himself – but he does not at that point end up believing. He is just amazed – we are told - he saw the linen cloths lying in the tomb. An interesting detail. Remember last week I mentioned how the cry of the angels at Christ's birth, is matched virtually word for word, this time by the crowd on Palm Sunday: "Peace in heaven, and glory in highest heaven." So here is a detail from Luke's account of Christ's birth I am sure you have often thought about: Mary, and quoting from Luke 2 "gave birth to her son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger." A very human thing to do with strips of cloth: swaddle a baby. Here, same word, same strips of cloth – but this time mysteriously lying there unravelled, loose, no longer tightly wrapped around a corpse. For Peter he went home amazed. Again – hardly he is risen, he is risen indeed. But Luke is certainly trying to tell us something through these various encounters.

The story goes on to the two walking to the village of Emmaus later on that day. As we know in that story, these two followers again did not see, or comprehend, it was Jesus on that road with them. Only with hindsight as they **remembered** (that word again) their experience, and particularly their sharing of a meal with Jesus, did they begin to see, understand Jesus was no longer dead, but alive. These two on the road, just as with the group of the women at the tomb, and also Peter, had then to go and share their experiences with a larger group. These two promptly turned around and walked all the way back to Jerusalem to tell the others.

You see a pattern emerging here. A strange experience is shared with others. And only then is Luke able to record by verse 34 of this chapter: "The Lord has risen indeed". To get to this point – there was sorrow, terror, puzzlement and hearts strangely warmed for the various followers of Jesus. All those involved sensed there was something profound and deep unfolding. All seemed to sense it – but what did it mean?

Well, there was remembering, deliberate and conscious remembering. For the women in the midst of this unfolding mystery, they remembered the words of Jesus; for the two on the road, it was their own remembering, with the guidance of the risen Christ, that they could piece together the scriptures, and then the breaking of bread pointed to what it now all meant. Jesus had been cruelly killed – but now slowly all the bits and pieces were coming together. His message lived – indeed the Christ still lived.

Now a half a millennium before these events, during the Jewish exile in Babylon, a prophet boldly reflected the word of the Lord to the people:

"For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth."

Indeed so radical, and unbelievable was this new creation – "former things shall not be remembered or come to mind." For the children of Israel, then still languishing in exile, they were told they would return to the land, to Jerusalem. The covenant with Yahweh still stood. The prophet in the subsequent verses of his bold assertion, unpacks what this new creation, this new heaven and a new earth, looks like. We hear these wondrous images and pictures.

There will be no more sound of weeping and distress.

Children will not die as infants. Adults will live out a full and long life – indeed you will feel cheated if you don't make it to a hundred.

People will build houses, plant crops, develop livelihoods, and they will not have them taken

from them - one can imagine through war, drought, flood, economic forces.
The generations will be settled and prosperous.
Even the wolf will lie down with the lamb.

These are wonderful glimpses of what this a new heaven and new earth, this new creation, will look like.

But then do all the boxes have to be ticked, at the same time and in the same place, for there to be a new heaven and new earth? Or will your glimpse and understanding over here, be added with this insight and experience over there. With imagination, we can see new possibilities for a new creation. One person's vision and experience of new life, brings to mind other possibilities. The different stories, experiences come together and can inspire a community and the whole group.

So we see with the resurrection accounts, this part of the mystery will be added with that insight from over there. . . . and eventually, **in community**, we can say He is risen, he is risen indeed. Your insights, your sightings of life in the midst of death, will be added to someone else's sensing of a new creation – and before long, the church is affirming: Christ is risen, he is risen indeed. Jesus lives.

In Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* the agnostic brother, Ivan in his famous dialogue with his brother the novice priest, Aloyshe, says that being a believer is not enough. He wants actually to see for himself. To taste it – to see it!

“I want to see with my own eyes the lion lie down with the lamb and the murdered man rise up and embrace his murderer. I want to be there when everyone suddenly finds out what it has all been for.”

This morning, I want to say, not only is it true, as Brendan Byrne asserts, “that a community of faith only comes to full knowledge, faith and understanding when individuals and groups bring together and share their previously separate stories” but we also no Christ is risen because we can see and it (unlike Ivan) for ourselves

Of course this is a very post modern understanding of Easter Day. By that I mean there isn't one dominant narrative (there is the resurrection and that is it); but isolated, smaller insights pieced together which show there are signs of new life, out of death; or there are experiences of a new heaven and new earth. Those various random experiences then only come to fullness and completion when we each contribute “our previously separate stories”.

In the church, when we share those visions will we see and discern this new life in Christ – today. And like Ivan Karamazov – we don't just want words, or statements of faith, or creeds, or liturgical affirmations, or even just stories – we want to be there, we want to experience this new life all the time. We may not be able to see it all, say tick all the boxes of Isaiah's vision – but we could hope to see peace in one of our world's trouble spots, or dreadful diseases compassionately and tenderly treated, or all children have an access to an education, or people have fresh, clear running water, or those suffering with mental health issues becoming an integral part of our community. And this list or glimpses of this new life in Christ goes on and on.

And with each experience and story of new life out of death we can say: Christ is no longer dead but alive. Alleluia!