

Easter Sunday

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In January 2007 in the middle of a Washington DC train station a Washington newspaper carried out an experiment. A young man stood beside a wall at the top of an escalator wearing jeans and a baseball cap. He was playing a violin with an open case on the ground for passersby to drop money in. The experiment was to see if people would recognise something of great value when they came in contact with it.

The young man was Josh Bell, a world renowned violinist, who 3 days before had played to a sell out audience in Boston's Symphony Hall where the average ticket price was \$100US. The violin he was playing was handcrafted almost 300 years earlier by a genius violin maker called Stradivari and was valued at \$3.5million. The 6 pieces he played over the 45mins of the experiment were known as some of the hardest to perform on a violin.

During the 45mins of his busking performance 1097 people passed by. Of those, only 7 people stopped to listen, 27 people gave a donation which at the end of 45mins totalled \$32. More than 1000 people never stopped, never even turned to look and missed the opportunity to hear one of the greatest musicians of our time.

Very often this is how our world treats Jesus and the Easter story. How easy it is for Easter to become merely about eggs and chocolate and 5 days holiday. Today we remember that Easter is about an empty tomb, from which the saviour of the world has risen. Jesus came "that we may have life", to inaugurate a new kingdom, one filled with hope for all, one where our relationship with God is restored, where the relationship of all creation is restored.

In the reading from John we see this restoration of relationship, this hope growing in two key individuals.

The beloved disciple gets to the tomb first, He sees the strips of linen that contrast with the tangle of cloth Lazarus walks from the tomb in John 11. The grave clothes around Jesus had been purposefully removed and

folded. Following Peter's lead the beloved disciple then goes in and in vs 8 we read the ambiguous phrase "he saw and believed". Though vs 9 tells us they still did not understand that scripture predicts that Jesus had to rise from the dead, perhaps something stirs in this disciple and he "believes" with new eyes. Interpreting what he saw it would seem faith takes shape in a whole new form. Hope that the cross is not the finish. That Jesus' story has more to be told.

Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb in the early morning darkness and to her utter distress finds the stone rolled away. Her world is in tatters having been there when Jesus hung on the cross and died. Mary is completely devoted to her Lord and to have his body taken leaves her distraught. Even speaking with the 2 angels cannot console or distract Mary from her grief, she just wants him back. Then the moment occurs that resounds through the gospels – Jesus appears before Mary.

It is interesting that in a patriarchal society such as this, where no female voice is accepted as a credible witness the gospels tell of women being the first witnesses. It would seem fitting that Jesus, who dined with sinners, touched the sick and welcomed children, should appear first to a woman. The very fact that the writers include these first witness accounts, credible or not in that society, lends weight to the truthfulness of what they write.

Mary, through her tears, does not recognise Jesus at first, thinking him to be the gardener, the one most likely to have shifted Jesus' body. With one word Mary's world changes forever. He calls her by name "Mary". Her eyes are opened. "Teacher" she cries. In the midst of her distress, Jesus floods her life with hope – he is not dead, he is alive. The death of the cross, the sealing of the tomb has not held him, he is alive. The relationship severed by his death is restored in all its fullness.

Jesus tells Mary not to cling to him for his ascension to the Father is not yet complete. Did Mary wish to hold onto the Lord whom she thought she had lost that he might never leave her again? An entirely human response. What Mary doesn't yet understand is that there is nothing now that can separate her from the saviour's love. Death the ultimate separation, has been overcome. In John 15-16 Jesus has made clear that he cannot be held, his return to the father must occur that the Counsellor, the Spirit of Truth (John 15-16) might come in fullness and testify to what God has done. Jesus commissions Mary to go and tell the disciples he is

returning to the Father who is their Father also. We read that her first response to them is “I have seen the Lord”.

What does “resurrection” mean to you today?

In a world that busily passes by a renowned violinist the same might be said of the most earth-shattering, history changing moment we will ever know. The truth is Easter changed our story forever. In dying on the cross and rising from the dead Jesus’ claims are vindicated. God enters our world in the incarnation and makes a way that all might return to the relationship with him we were created for from the beginning. The resurrection is God’s “yes” to humanity. And yet it somehow manages to go unnoticed by so many of our families, our friends, our colleagues, our world.

Let us remember today the magnitude of Easter. To rejoice in what the Saviour of the world has done for all creation. To celebrate that our Lord lives and the kingdom we pray will come has indeed come, at least in part. In our call to worship the Psalmist speaks of having opened for us the “gates of righteousness”. Jesus calls himself the gate (John 10:7), the door to a new way of life, a new kingdom. Today may we remember that through Jesus life, death and resurrection we are able to step through the doorway to life with God as he intended. As we gather soon around the communion table there will be an opportunity to remember and respond to Jesus call to follow him, to pass through the door to this new life and remember again that Jesus calls our name too just as he did Mary’s, and invites us into the kingdom that Easter reminds us of.

There may be some today who feel far away from the hope of Easter. Sadness, grief, pain, sickness or fear can flood our lives just as it did Mary’s. Easter has a message of hope for here too.

Nearly 100 years ago Antarctic explorer Ernest Shackleton gathered a ship and crew together to be the first expedition to cross the Antarctic. Unfortunately his ship became trapped in the ice causing it to sink. The expedition was left stranded floating on the ice for nearly 500 days before reaching a place called Elephant Island. In a daring attempt to rescue his team Shackleton left 22 of his men behind and with 5 others took a small boat to travel to another Island called South Georgia. Navigating only by

the stars and through treacherous seas they made it and Shackleton set about making plans to rescue the rest of his crew.

The officer in charge of the 22 men left behind knew Shackleton had promised to return to rescue them and every day he got the men up saying to them “come on lads, get to it, the boss is coming back today”. Days and days went by with many reasons to give up any hope of rescue but each day the officer reminded the men to be ready for Shackleton’s return. “Come on lads, get to it, the boss is coming back today”. 10 months later Shackleton did return, fulfilling his promise and rescuing every man from his crew.

There are times in this life when we can feel adrift from God. When any thoughts of restored relationship seem far removed from our own reality. In those times especially we need the hope of Easter. We need to allow the empty tomb and the voice of the resurrected Jesus to speak to us. Jesus has overcome the world. In the words of “Thine be the glory” he is the “risen conquering son”. He “aids us in our strife” and “fear and gloom are scattered”. “Death has indeed lost its sting” and his promise is that he will one day return again. Christians hold to the belief that the “boss is coming back” and death and sorrow will be no more. Perhaps today you need to peer in on the empty tomb and remember again it is empty and because of that there is hope.