

Christ has Risen

And today is Easter Sunday. Our journey through Holy Week has followed that of the 1st disciples. And what a **tumultuous journey** it has been - a journey of baited **expectation**, moments of beautiful **intimacy** and sharing, of friendship and **vulnerability**, of shocking **betrayal**, of **mob-rule**, and **arrests** in the middle of the night, of **trumpeted up trials**, **lying witnesses** and **miscarried justice**. The week that began with a **triumphant parade** has turned into journey of **fear**, of **fleeing disciples**, a **mob baying for blood** and an ice hearted judge **washing his hands** of responsibility, knowingly condemning an innocent man to death. From there it becomes a story of brutal torture, & execution by the State as an innocent man is forced to die a slow & wretched death, abandoned, mocked & shamed by all those around him.

Can you imagine the emotions the disciples have been through these past few days? Only a week ago they were entering the city & it was **all joy, like a giant street party**, with shouts of **acclamation** ringing in their ears. For those following Jesus, it must have felt so good, that finally, after three long years it seemed like everybody else was **finally getting it**, finally understanding who Jesus really was - the Messiah! And then, from that point on, **everything begins to fall apart**. Shockingly, one of their own band of brothers has slipped away to make a secret deal with the temple authorities in which he will **betray** Jesus into their hands.

On the **Thursday** of that week, Jesus gathers them together for one last, emotion filled **meal**. At the beginning of that meal, he had stripped off his outer garments, knelt before each of them & **tenderly washed & dried** their feet. Although only his words to Peter are recorded, my sense is that he would have lingered over each disciple, whispering words of encouragement to each one. And at this last **intimate meal**, he gives them the **love command**, the command to love one another. It is so significant that of all the commands he could have given them at this last meal, this is the command he leaves them with. After having dried their feet, and after having shared the **bread & the wine** with them, and explained its significance representing his blood & body, he says "My children, I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and just as I told the Jewish leaders, so I tell you now: Where I am going, you cannot come. "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. And by this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." In Luke's version of the last supper, Jesus fleshes that out further, teaching them that "the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves" (Luke 22:26).

By this point their hearts must nearly have been breaking, but worse is to come. Jesus leads them from the upper room across the Kidron to the Garden of Gethsemane, where he knows he will be arrested. There he falls on his knees, & in great anguish prays so earnestly that sweat mixed with blood begins to run down his face. And then, in the deepest part of the night, with darkness pushing down upon them like a heavy hand - an ominous procession of torches and lanterns approaches. It's Judas leading the temple police to come arrest Jesus. There is a brief skirmish with Peter wildly swinging a sword around him until Jesus steps in & stops him with a cry of "Enough" , & then Jesus is seized & dragged off to be interrogated. And at this point, the disciples flee, scatter. They are so confused, so disoriented, to frightened, they have no sense of what is happening, or why, or what role they are supposed to play. A few days ago it had seemed as though the whole

city was celebrating Jesus and his Messiahship, and that the Kingdom of God was about to arrive in Israel - and now this. They are paralysed, not knowing what to do, what to think or what to expect - except that - this is bad.

And it gets worse, as a series of appalling mock trials follow - before the High Priest, before Herod, before Pilate - each one more confusing & disastrous, as the lies and false testimony mount & it starts to become clear that this is going to end only one way.

Before their eyes, the disciples see their Master stripped naked & whipped so brutally there is no skin left on his back. They see him being dragged from the whipping post to the place of execution, the skull, Golgotha, and before their eyes they see their Lord, their beloved Rabbi, crucified, nailed to a cross, gasping for air & bleeding to death. And it seems it was only the women disciples, along with John, who had the emotional courage to stay with Jesus throughout the final hours of his agony - all the others have fled or are in hiding.

And finally, it as if the whole Universe cannot bear to watch this happening any longer, darkness falls upon the land, and the earth shakes, and Jesus cries out "IT IS FINISHED" and breathes his last. And it seems like all hope has gone, all light extinguished, all dreams crushed.

And so, Jesus is dead. Two disciples we're heard very little about, Nicodemus & Joseph, come and take his body away from the cross to lay it reverently in a nearby tomb. After all the indignity Jesus' body has been subjected to, finally someone appears who is willing to show him a some dignity, some honour. And so they lay his broken body in Joseph's own tomb, and then under Pilate's instructions, at the prompting of the Priests, the entrance to the tomb is sealed with a large rock, & guarded by the might of Rome's military power - just to make sure that this dead trouble-maker, this dead revolutionary, this blasphemer - stays in his place.

Can you imagine the despair, the helplessness that the disciples are experiencing at this moment? Can you imagine how long and how dark the 24 hrs of Easter Saturday must have been for the Jesus' friends? They had invested all they had into following Jesus. They had literally given up everything - they had left homes, jobs, families - to follow this Jesus for the last three years, believing he was the Messiah who would usher in the Kingdom of God. And this is what it has come to.

For us who know the whole story, & who have read it so many times, its hard for us to imagine how deep their despair must have been that easter Saturday. Sure, Jesus had tried to tell them about his coming resurrection, but they had absolutely not been able to understand what he meant. Being good Jews, they could only envision the resurrection that would take place at the end of time, before God's judgement. So as far as they were concerned, Jesus was dead, & was going to stay dead for a very long time.

And perhaps some of you feel you are still living in **Easter Saturday**. Feeling battered and bruised by all that has happened in your life & unsure of what will happen next. **But Sunday's coming.**

And then Sunday does come. **Sunrise. Dawn.** And what were these woman experiencing as they approached Jesus' tomb in that morning half-light? I imagine they hadn't slept much that night or the one before. I imagine they felt **hollow, exhausted, wrung out.** As

to their intentions, I think like Joseph & Nicodemus they just wanted to confer some **dignity** on the body of Jesus, that they had seen so **desecrated & brutalised** earlier.

The first rays of the sun are breaking over the horizon, and light is beginning to strike the face of the rocks surrounding the tomb...

...and so we come to the beginning of this passage in Matthew that we read earlier. In that pearly half-light, the **air** seems **unnaturally still**, everything **strangely quiet**. *Something is about to happen*. Something so profound, so **earth shattering**, so **life changing**, so **history altering**, that like Jesus' *birth*, its is announced by **Angels**, and like Jesus' *death*, it shakes the very foundations of the earth! It is as if heaven & earth are **splitting open**, & in a sense they are!

The **rock** holding Jesus in the tomb has been *rolled back*. But even more than that, **the power of death** holding Jesus lifeless, is being *rolled back*. *Death itself is being ripped apart, darkness itself is being split asunder; despair itself is being shattered* as Jesus begins to rise up and disentangle himself from his **grave clothes** and begins to **emerge** not just from the **tomb** but **from death itself**.

Heeding the Angel's instructions, the women begin to run back to tell the male disciples what has happened. At this point both an **awestruck fear** and an **exploding joy** are beginning to course through them & compete for control of their bodies & minds. **And then they see Jesus!** And now they know it is true - *life has conquered death, love has conquered hate, and joy has conquered despair*.

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Now with our 2nd reading, we skip forward a few more hours to later that same day, to where the male disciples are gathered, and Jesus now comes & stands among them, speaking into their fearful minds words of peace, filling their broken hearts with new joy, breathing upon them the power of his Spirit, and commissioning them with the message & the reality of forgiveness.

Wow - what a journey, what a story. But really, its just the beginning of the story isn't it - both theirs & ours? From here we move onto the book of Acts, and we read how these same men & women, now filled with hope, now filled with joy, now filled with courage, begin to move across the face of the known world, preaching this message of resurrection, preaching this message of forgiveness of sins, preaching this message of hope in the face of hopelessness.

This is the greatest story ever told. This is the story that changes everything! And this is our story.

But why doesn't the whole world believe it? Well, if we had read just a little further on from our Matthew passage, we would have come across an alternative explanation of the resurrection story - an alternative fact if you like. In Matthew 28:11-15 we read that the temple authorities immediately kick into action with a plan to explain away what has happened: they coach (a pay) the troop of soldiers to say that the disciples came in the middle of the night, while they were asleep, & stole the body. Now immediately I see some problems with this explanation. I mean - how quiet can you be when you are rolling away a huge rock from a tomb entrance, & dragging out a dead body. And these soldiers are the highly trained marines of the best military force existing at the time. I can't imagine them

falling asleep on the job, let alone sleeping through a complex heist like this one. And the even bigger problem with this alternative story is that these same disciples are soon spreading out across the empire, as changed men & women, proclaiming that Jesus has risen from the dead. Something very, very powerful has happened, that has changed them from those who were cowering behind locked doors for fear of the authorities, for fear that they too would be arrested & executed, to a few days later being those who are out on the streets fearlessly announcing that Jesus has risen from the dead & that our sins can be forgiven through his name. For example, in Acts 3 & 4 we read about Peter & John healing a crippled man in the name of Jesus, and preaching about the resurrection, & the temple leaders arresting them but being so perplexed by it all. Hadn't they just executed their leader, Jesus? So why is this movement still going, in fact growing & flourishing! Acts 4:13 says that when the temple leaders saw the courage of Peter & John, & realised that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished.

What's more, history tells us that each of the 11 disciples, with the exception of John, was eventually martyred for their faith in Jesus and their belief that he had risen from the dead. Now, if they had actually stolen his dead body from the tomb, or had any other reason to know that he hadn't really risen from the dead, would they have been willing to die for that lie? And what would that say about their integrity, and their honesty - values that those first Christians valued so highly?

But something had happened - something so powerful that it had changed their hearts, changed their souls, changed their whole lives, and filled them with a joy and a peace that made them prepared to suffer any cost for the sake of spreading Jesus' message, and bringing the gift of Jesus' life to all the world.

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Now this is important, crucial, because Paul - that hater of the early Christians, who was converted by meeting the risen Christ while on his way to persecute believers, over in 1 Corinthians 15:17-18 he reminds us that if Jesus hasn't really risen from the dead, then our faith is in vain, & really, our religion is pointless, and as fools we are to be more pitied than any other group of people.

So, what about us here today? This is a wonderful story, and its wonderful if we know it & believe it. But God wants us to more than just believe this story. God wants us to experience this story in our own lives. In Philippians 3:10 Paul says "I want to know Christ & the power of his resurrection & the fellowship of his sufferings". In Ephesians 1:18-20 Paul says "I pray that the eyes of your hearts may be opened so that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the power he used to raise Christ from the dead."

If we let this power into our lives, we will be transformed, and the world around us will never be the same again either.

In that small passage we read from John's gospel: there are four gifts that the risen Jesus confers on his disciples when he meets with them:

The first is Peace. His greeting is "peace be upon you" which is an echo of something he has already promised them earlier in this gospel, at the end of chapter 16, at the end of the

Last Supper narrative: "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

The second gift is joy: like the women who met Jesus near the tomb, these terrified men are now filled with joy. A joy that is willing to face persecution, suffering and death - and not be afraid.

The third gift is Jesus' own Spirit, the Holy Spirit, which he now breathes on them, & the fullness of which they will receive shortly at the day of Pentecost.

The fourth is forgiveness, both for themselves as those who fled & abandoned Jesus, and as a gift for the world, an incredible, life changing forgiveness that they are to practice & spread far and wide; a forgiveness that can take away guilt, that can dissolve hate, and that can heal relationships.

These four gifts combined to turn these men and women into *one of the bravest forces the world had ever seen*. **Think about it:** Jesus started his whole movement with this band of **12 men and 8 or so women** - this movement that within a short-time was so **threatening to Rome** that there would be a brutal backlash & persecution. But they had a **joy & a peace** that could not be taken away from them, even in the face of **persecution and suffering**. Goodness me, there's that bit in the book of Acts, **Acts 5:40** where the disciples are arrested for preaching the message of Jesus, and are brought in & **flogged** by the authorities, & then it says they exit **rejoicing** because they have been counted **worthy** to share the **suffering of Jesus**. Its incredible - *when they suffer, they rejoice; when they are cursed, they bless; and when they are hated, they forgive & they love*. And you & I are called to go out & do the same.

But here's the thing, as with the 1st disciples, the **resurrection of Jesus is the start of my story & your story**. Its new beginning, a 2nd chance; its like being **born again**. And the same **four gifts** that Jesus bought to these disciples after his resurrection, are available to us here today.

Joy, peace, the power of his Spirit, and forgiveness. If we have these gifts in our lives, like these first disciples, there is nothing we cannot do and nothing we cannot overcome. **Even death itself will not deter us or frighten us.**

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PAUSE - we have a piece of music to listen to now - let the words of this Easter Song (Matthew Ward) wash over us as we open our hearts & worship Jesus for all he has done & all he is.