

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**

**WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

**Sermon – Easter Day**

**4<sup>th</sup> April 2021**

**All Saints' Marseille**

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When you think of the hundreds of millions of Christians celebrating Easter today, it is striking to reflect that the resurrection took place when no one was present and that its immediate aftermath was witnessed by only a handful of people. In the Gospel account of John, it is Mary Magdalene who is first on the scene, followed at her invitation by Peter and 'the disciple whom Jesus loved', usually taken to mean John himself. At its origin the whole thing appears to have been on the smallest of scales.

Yet the impact of those earliest witnesses was immense, like the parables Jesus told of tiny seeds bearing much fruit. Notwithstanding the persecutions they suffered and even the risk of death, these early followers went on telling the story, until finally it was written down as the original eye-witnesses were reaching the end of their lives. At which point the Gospel writers began to record how 'early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed'. And how that matter-of-fact sentence marks a turning point in the history of the world.

Some have said that the current pandemic will be seen as a turning point. The world is living through a crisis that is testing what people think about the fundamentals of human existence. One thing that has dominated the last year, underlying the sense of anxiety that has gripped many communities and especially the media, is the fear of death. In a society where, in contrast to previous centuries, Christian faith is no longer a given in many people's sense of identity, do we as followers of Christ have anything useful to say? I believe we do.

Last night we lit our Easter candle, which today we brought into church. It witnesses to the power of the risen Christ to bring us out of darkness into light. The truth of Easter is that, ultimately, love is stronger than hate and life is stronger than death – words which we will hear sung in our anthem this morning. And, in Christ, the God who shows his power in creating and re-creating us invites us to trust him in life and in death. That is the source of our Easter joy.

The earliest Christians celebrated that joy by enacting a symbol of death and resurrection in baptism. Immersing themselves into a river or pool, their rising out of the water symbolized a movement from death to life. The apostle Paul found the experience so life-changing that he wrote about it in terms of being reborn: 'If anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation.'<sup>1</sup> Their understanding of Christ's resurrected body – what Paul would elsewhere call a 'spiritual body'<sup>2</sup> - was that it was no longer under the dominion of death. However far beyond our rational understanding that may be, they were convinced that here was the

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Corinthians 5.17

<sup>2</sup> 1 Corinthians 15.44

evidence and the promise that human beings, created by a God who is love, cannot ultimately be destroyed by death but are created for life with God for ever. As Michael Mayne, the former Dean of Westminster, wrote, this is the 'strange and powerful claim' on which the Christian faith rests.<sup>3</sup>

It also means that for those who believe that God is like Jesus described God to be, everything is changed. The darkness will still be dark, but the Christlike God is with us in it, and beyond the grief and pain we experience, deeper and more lasting is God's unchanging love. As Mayne puts it, 'Human wickedness and evil are not diminished, but compassion and self-giving are stronger. The festering poison of resentment pales in the light of costly forgiveness. ... Even the death of the body ... is seen to have no power to erase the human spirit made in God's likeness'.<sup>4</sup> For the mystery of Easter is about God's creative power, which we see in the natural world around us every day as well as in the miracle of the human body. What God does in raising Christ from the dead is as powerful a creative act as the one with which the world was called into being.

For Jesus's earliest followers, the resurrection was the point at which the whole story of his life and death made sense, and they saw it had implications for the whole of humanity. Looking back, they could see the creative purposes of God, culminating in this moment. The risen Christ and Mary Magdalene. Two figures. A man and a woman in a garden, just like the first time. The new creation breaking through and becoming visible.

Where I live, at this time of year the sun rises through a gap in the hills and the whole valley is suddenly flooded with golden light. Easter is like that. In its light everything we believe about life and death is illuminated and changed. Some

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Mayne, *Alleluia is our Song* (2018).

<sup>4</sup> Michael Mayne, *Alleluia is our Song*, p 29.

people manage to live their whole lives in the light of its joy. Living life in the dimension of the eternal, rejoicing as the eternal breaks through into the present moment. No longer with a sense of life and capacity gradually reducing, but a journey towards something more wonderful than we are able to express or comprehend. Most of us muddle along with a sense that lies somewhere between the old and the new creation, occasionally infused with wonder and joy. Increasingly I have come to value, as much as the forty days of Lent, the fifty days of the Easter season that lie beyond it. For Easter doesn't end on Tuesday morning when the world goes back to work. It is with us for ever.

On Good Friday, we saw how the crucifixion assures us that our sinfulness cannot keep us from God. The resurrection assures us that the same is true of death. The empty tomb testifies to the strength of divine love. It is the ultimate promise of salvation, overcoming our greatest fear - the fear of extinction - and the thought that death will have the last word. God is a creator who calls us into being, who knows us before we were born and through every moment of our lives (as the writer of Psalm 139 understood so well). As Erik Kolbell writes, the one who knew us before we knew ourselves does not abandon us when our lifespan is over. Just as an unborn child knows nothing about the world they will soon inhabit, so we know nothing about the dimension into which we will be born at our death. But we believe that the God who has power to call us out of nothingness into life also has the power to call us out of death into new life.<sup>5</sup> That is the Christian hope.

Last night our curate Roxana read the ancient hymn known as the Exsultet, sung during the night that leads into Easter Day. We hesitated which version to use

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<sup>5</sup> Erik Kolbell, *Were you there?* (2005).

and finally decided on the traditional words, which are rich and sonorous and speak across time. But the modern version contains some powerful words too. It states so clearly the Christian hope in the face of death that I will end by quoting from it. And it seems to me that, in a society that has often seemed paralysed by the fear of death for more than a year now, it does represent something more than useful which followers of Christ have to say:

This is the night when God says 'No' to death,  
That final boundary to human life,  
That door we once feared to approach.  
This is the night God swallows death,  
Absorbs its sting into God's own life,  
Strips death of all power,  
Renews our fainting hearts.

...

And so, our God, in the joy of this Feast,  
Receive our offering of praise.'

Amen.