

Easter Day: Caught up in the New Creation

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor ACT—Easter Day, 1 April 2018

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Acts 10: 34-43; Psalm 118: 1-2, 14-24; 1 Cor 15: 1-11; John 20: 1-18

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

The stone that the builders rejected:

has become the head of the corner.

This is the Lord's doing:

and it is marvellous in our eyes. (Psalm 118: 22-23)

These words from today's psalm are used by Christians to proclaim the glory of Easter. On the one side, there had been religion and politics and cynical pragmatism, and the whole satanic mechanism that keeps order and control through exclusion and force; on the other side, there was a vulnerable and loving man sent by a vulnerable and loving God, who faced up to the world's worst terrors and tortures while refusing to perpetuate the cycle of violence. Jesus was that stone rejected by the builders of our conventional, more-or-less functional way of doing things and, like all of his kind, he had

to be gotten rid of. Yet something happened following Jesus' death that galvanised a new hope among his traumatised followers.

It appeared that God had vindicated the dead Jesus, who was back among his people. Jesus risen was the same yet wonderfully different, having gone ahead of us into the life of God. No wonder Christians quickly concluded that in Jesus Christ, God had visited his people to set them free, and hence that Jesus was one with God, the human face of God, the Son of God, as they started to say, who reveals the glory of his Father. All the New Testament writers and, later, the creeds with their doctrines of incarnation and Trinity testified to our growing appreciation of who Jesus was, and what sort of breakthrough he'd opened up, and who we now were thanks to his resurrection and his Spirit dwelling among us.

So, friends, when we hear our readings this morning, we're hearing voices from the early Church explaining what they were discovering about this new living reality, and about its implications. They didn't just proclaim a wonder from the past. Nor did anyone in the early Church think of the resurrection as a simple matter of belief, without it having any impact on how we live now. Instead, what we see in the New Testament is that encountering the risen Jesus was at the same time a summons to conversion and faith and mission—to be drawn

into a wonderful thing that wasn't just in the past, but which was now and forever.

The earliest voice in our readings this morning is that of Paul, in our Epistle. He tells the Corinthian Christians that the resurrection tradition, which had been handed on to him from the first Christian generation, was something he was handing on to them, something in which they stood now—in other words, not something to look back on, but something to actually be part of. Paul laments that he'd effectively been one of those builders who'd rejected Jesus, by rejecting and persecuting the Church, but thanks to his own late encounter with the resurrection, Paul came to realize that God had made Jesus the very cornerstone. Amazed by grace, Paul saw himself as living proof of the reality of Jesus' resurrection.

So did Peter, the next oldest voice we hear this morning, channelled for us by Luke in our reading from Acts. Peter speaks as head of the Church in Jerusalem, explaining how Jesus had helped the apostles to reinterpret Israel's national story, catching them up into his risen life as witnesses to a new reality of forgiveness not judgement, of humanity reunited with God. This new reality requires apostolic witnesses like Peter and the others—right through to our bishops today, as the apostolic succession is handed down the generations. Friends, the origin of Easter is certainly way back then, but the life of

Easter is here and now, as is the challenge to our generation of constantly rediscovering it, living it, and handing it on.

Then, from late in the first century, we have our resurrection testimony today from John's Gospel. This isn't like a police report aiming to state plain, uninterpreted facts. Rather, it's a late document, and its aim is to draw out implications of the resurrection for the Church. Let me briefly mention three aspects of this—of what life in the resurrection meant for the Christians among whom John's Gospel took shape.

First, in today's Gospel, did you notice the foot race to the empty tomb on Easter morning. Peter and the beloved disciple are neck and neck, this pair who always seem at odds in John's gospel—Peter the great apostle, and whoever the beloved disciple is (perhaps the Christian everyman, as Fr Martin suggested in his reflection here on Good Friday). Did you notice that the beloved disciple wins the race, but that Peter is the first to enter the tomb, but then Peter couldn't work it out, while the beloved disciple does work it out and becomes the first to believe?

Friends, what we seem to have here is an early recognition among Christians that leadership in the Church has two dimensions, which Leonardo Boff called charism and power. Peter represents power

and authority, while the beloved disciple represents spirituality and personal closeness to Jesus. Are we being told here that we need both: that we need popes and we need saints, that we need bishops and we need theologians, that we need priests and we need laity, and that the tension along all these axes is actually a creative tension that helps us know and serve the risen Christ better? This arrangement brings a kind of hybrid vigour that you don't get in the type of Church that's all about centralized power, or in the type of Church that's all about decentralized spirituality. Our Anglican tradition is committed to maintaining this tension. We're a traditional episcopal Church yet we have a dispersed form of governance with a place of dignity for everyone—or at least that's the theory. We Anglicans seek to maintain the creative centre where Catholic and Orthodox and Protestant emphases can meet. This is the type of Church in which God calls us to experience and to hand on the resurrection life.

Second, in today's Gospel from John, there's the Old Testament imagery that Mary Magdalene experiences. As she looked into the empty tomb, she was carried back to the Holy of Holies in the Jerusalem Temple, with the cherubim on either side of the ark of the covenant, which was empty. The two angels at either end of where Jesus' body had lain recall that holiest of sites among God's people—a place now occupied by the risen Jesus Christ.

Then follows her scene in the Garden, and of course we're meant to think of the Garden of Eden. But when the voice of Jesus comes to Mary Magdalene, just as the voice of God came to Eve in the Genesis story, Mary Magdalene is not disobedient. Hence, in this new Garden of Eden, we see creation beginning again. Just as Jesus the new Adam did not disobey God in the Garden of Gethsemane, Mary Magdalene as a new Eve did not betray God in this Easter Garden.

My third point here is that all bets are clearly off for John's Gospel in its account of the resurrection. Not only could a woman look into the Holy of Holies, but a woman could now be commissioned as an apostle, sent to proclaim the good news to men, at a time when women couldn't even be witnesses under Jewish law. So Eve's curse has been lifted, and new woman leads humanity into a new age.

Certainly, this story of Mary Magdalene, the so-called apostle to the apostles, was one of the texts that helped our Church embrace the idea that women could and should be priests and bishops. Because Jesus' resurrection means that the aeons are shifting, so that the world is beginning again for us in new and unexpected ways.

To sum up, the old way of building the world, which involved Jesus being got rid of, is suddenly revealed to have got things completely

wrong. Instead, the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.

For Paul, the former persecutor of Christianity, the risen Jesus Christ summoned him into a new life, to a new self-understanding. For Peter, another who'd denied Jesus, the resurrection brought a new start and a new life beyond failure and judgement—a faith being handed on from the first witnesses to new witnesses in every generation. For John's Gospel today, the resurrection brought a new way of being together which is hybrid and creative. Finally, in company with Mary Magdalene, we find ourselves in the Holy of Holies, and returned to the Garden of Eden with a second chance.

So, friends, on Easter Day we don't just acknowledge an unlikely past event and then go home to our lives in the real world. Instead, here in the Eucharist for Easter Day, we discover a *more real world*—the very world into which we've already been inducted through our baptism.

This is the day that the Lord has made:

Let us rejoice and be glad in it. (Psalm 118: 24)

The Lord be with you ...