

31 March 2024 at 9.00 am and 10.30 am Easter Sunday services

WHY DO YOU LOOK FOR THE LIVING AMONG THE DEAD? HE IS NOT HERE; HE HAS RISEN!

Sermon preached by The Revd Dr Tony Martin delivered at Cromwell
Presbyterian Church



READINGS:

Exodus 14:10-31; 15:20-21

As Pharaoh approached, the Israelites looked up, and there were the Egyptians, marching after them. They were terrified and cried out to the Lord. 11 They said to Moses, “Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? 12 Didn’t we say to you in Egypt, ‘Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians’? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!”

13 Moses answered the people, “Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. 14 The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still.”

15 Then the Lord said to Moses, “Why are you crying out to me? Tell the Israelites to move on. 16 Raise your staff and stretch out your hand over the sea to divide the water so that the Israelites can go through the sea on dry

ground. 17 I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after them. And I will gain glory through Pharaoh and all his army, through his chariots and his horsemen. 18 The Egyptians will know that I am the Lord when I gain glory through Pharaoh, his chariots and his horsemen.”

19 Then the angel of God, who had been traveling in front of Israel’s army, withdrew and went behind them. The pillar of cloud also moved from in front and stood behind them, 20 coming between the armies of Egypt and Israel. Throughout the night the cloud brought darkness to the one side and light to the other side; so neither went near the other all night long.

21 Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and all that night the Lord drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land. The waters were divided, 22 and the Israelites went through the sea on dry

ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left.

23 The Egyptians pursued them, and all Pharaoh's horses and chariots and horsemen followed them into the sea. **24** During the last watch of the night the Lord looked down from the pillar of fire and cloud at the Egyptian army and threw it into confusion. **25** He jammed the wheels of their chariots so that they had difficulty driving. And the Egyptians said, "Let's get away from the Israelites! The Lord is fighting for them against Egypt."

26 Then the Lord said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea so that the waters may flow back over the Egyptians and their chariots and horsemen." **27** Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at daybreak the sea went back to its place. The Egyptians were fleeing toward it, and the Lord swept them into the sea. **28** The water flowed back and covered the chariots and horsemen—the entire army of

Pharaoh that had followed the Israelites into the sea. Not one of them survived.

29 But the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left. 30 That day the Lord saved Israel from the hands of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians lying dead on the shore. 31 And when the Israelites saw the mighty hand of the Lord displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the Lord and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant.

20 Then Miriam the prophet, Aaron's sister, took a timbrel in her hand, and all the women followed her, with timbrels and dancing. 21 Miriam sang to them:

**“Sing to the Lord,
for he is highly exalted.
Both horse and driver
he has hurled into the sea.”**

Psalm 118:1-2,14-24

**1 Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
his love endures forever.**

2 Let Israel say:

“His love endures forever.”

**14 The Lord is my strength and my defense;
he has become my salvation.**

15 Shouts of joy and victory

resound in the tents of the righteous:

**“The Lord’s right hand has done mighty
things!**

**16 The Lord’s right hand is lifted high;
the Lord’s right hand has done mighty
things!”**

17 I will not die but live,

and will proclaim what the Lord has done.

**18 The Lord has chastened me severely,
but he has not given me over to death.**

**19 Open for me the gates of the righteous;
I will enter and give thanks to the Lord.**

20 This is the gate of the Lord

through which the righteous may enter.

21 I will give you thanks, for you answered me;

you have become my salvation.

22 The stone the builders rejected

has become the cornerstone;

23 the Lord has done this,

and it is marvelous in our eyes.

24 The Lord has done it this very day;

let us rejoice today and be glad.

Romans 6:3-11

Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? 4 We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

5 For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his. 6 For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin— 7 because anyone who has died has been set free from sin.

8 Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. 9 For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. 10 The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God.

11 In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Luke 24:1-12

Jesus Has Risen

24 On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. 2 They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, 3 but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. 4 While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. 5 In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? 6 He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: 7 ‘The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.’ ” 8 Then they remembered his words.

9 When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others. 10 It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with

them who told this to the apostles. 11 But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense. 12 Peter, however, got up and ran to the tomb. Bending over, he saw the strips of linen lying by themselves, and he went away, wondering to himself what had happened.

COLLECT

Alleluia, God Eternal;
death cannot contain your glory, nor our mind
confine this mystery. Give us faith's insight,
free us from all fear,
and release in us the Risen Christ. Through
Jesus Christ our Liberator, who is alive and
reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen

SENTENCE FOR THE DAY

**Alleluia! The Lord is risen indeed. To him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Alleluia!
Luke 24:34; Revelation 1:6**

INTRODUCTION

I wonder if you can recall a fireworks display ... perhaps from your childhood. On one occasion while I was serving as a chaplain in Londonderry, I watched what was for me a most dramatic and no doubt expensive fireworks display imaginable. It was Northern Ireland of course and one has to say they had experience in explosives. The whole sky was filled with rockets, exploding stars, and Catherine wheels of all colours, which lasted for about a full 15 minutes. There can't have been any gunpowder left in the whole of the island.

I wonder have you ever thought the account of Jesus' Passion ... his final week, death and resurrection ... sparkles with bursts of drama that detonated like fireworks in a night sky?

On the way to the cross ... Jesus in excruciating pain was aided by Simon of Cyrene carrying his cross and flashed a warning ... to the daughters of Jerusalem ... who were weeping and wailing for him.

Luke 23:26–31 : 26 As the soldiers led him away, they seized Simon from Cyrene, who was on his way in from the country, and put the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus. 27 A large number of people followed him, including women who mourned and wailed for him. 28 Jesus turned and said to them, “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children. 29 For the time will come when you will say, ‘Blessed are the childless women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!’ 30 Then

““they will say to the mountains, “Fall on us!” and to the hills, “Cover us!””

And on the cross the metaphorical fireworks exploded all about ... extraordinary grace ... came from the tortured agonised heart of Christ ... for the Roman soldiers ... as he forgave them

Luke 23:34 Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.

and then grace enveloped the repentant thief as he was promised Paradise

Luke 23:42 Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

43 Jesus answered him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

And from Jesus' triumphant shout at the moment of his death, **“Father, into your hands I commit my spirit” (v. 46),**

... would flow bright beams of grace ... grace to the Gentiles ... grace to his own people ... and grace to his followers.

Eternity shuddered ... from east to west ... at that defining moment ... when grace was poured out ... on sinful humanity.

Of course, we see this explosion of drama, life, forgiveness and grace ... because we have the retrospect of the gospel writers ... which they ... and those present ... did not fully understand at that moment in time.

They saw no rockets burst in the sky over the cross. All they could see was the encroaching darkness and gloom ... as Jesus slumped into unconsciousness ... in agonising pain.

None of Jesus' followers had even the slightest glimmer of hope.

The only light that shone was the light of love and devotion in the lives of some of his followers such as Joseph of Arimathea and the women who had followed him from Galilee.

Of **Joseph**, Luke writes, **“Now there was a man named Joseph, a member of the Council, a good and upright man, who had not consented to their decision and action. He came from the Judean town of Arimathea and he was waiting for the kingdom of God” (vv. 50, 51).**

Now the site of Arimathea is generally thought to be the modern town of **Rentis**, just north of Jerusalem.

Joseph’s proximity and membership in the Sanhedrin ... had led him ... to have a new family tomb ... excavated near the Holy City.

Apparently, he was out of town when the Sanhedrin condemned Jesus because the deed

was done by a unanimous vote that he did not consent to (cf. Mark 14:64; Luke 22:70, 71).

Or perhaps the trial had been hidden from him ... because he was out of sync with the tyranny of the Sanhedrin.

John's Gospel tells us he was a secret disciple of Jesus (19:38).

Indeed, Luke says ... he was a man of character **“a good and upright man.”**

And as such, he fits the pattern of pious Jews mentioned at the beginning of Luke's Gospel whom God used, people like the parents of John the Baptist, Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth, who were **“upright in the sight of God”** (1:6), and the aged Simeon in the temple who was not only an upright man but was **“waiting for the consolation of Israel”** (2:25), just as Joseph of Arimathea was **“waiting for the kingdom of God.”**

Wealthy Joseph of Arimathea ... humbly longed for the kingdom ... that Jesus preached - even though Jesus had said, **“It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God”** (18:25).

What a shock for Joseph it must have been ... to learn too late ... of Jesus' crucifixion.

Joseph evidently decided he would be a secret disciple no more! Scripture says,

Going to Pilate, he asked for Jesus' body. Then he took it down, wrapped it in linen cloth and placed it in a tomb cut in the rock, one in which no one had yet been laid.

He had no hope ... his only consolation ... was that he honoured Christ.

And unlike Joseph of Arimathea, the women had been public followers of Jesus ... from his Galilean days ... and they had witnessed the horrible event from a distance.

Now ... they sadly applauded Joseph ... in their hearts.

Luke 23:55-56 “The women who had come with Jesus from Galilee followed Joseph and saw the tomb and how his body was laid in it. Then they went home and prepared spices and perfumes. But they rested on the Sabbath in obedience to the commandment”

You see the haste of the burial had not allowed for the essential anointing with oil. When the sun rose after the Sabbath, the women would be ready.

I can only imagine they slept and eat ... very little or ... not at all ... during those two nights.

So, let us this morning reflect on the women's experience of Easter

FIRSTLY, THEY WERE BEWILDERED

I believe the women had an emotional and spiritual dark sackcloth covering their souls.

They were depressed, exhausted, mourning, with no hope whatsoever—and according to the Gospel of Mark, fretting ... over how they would get ... into the tomb (16:3).

They apparently didn't expect anything except more sorrow.

Allow me to ask ... sensitively ... if you were to take flowers to a cemetery to attend the grave of a recently deceased person ... what would you expect to see ... an empty grave?

And if you did see one ... would it occur to you ... that the deceased ... had risen from the dead?

Of course not! Well, at least I wouldn't.

We read, **on the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb.**

They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, and when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus (vv. 1–3).

Now, understandably, they were definitely confused and bewildered! Perhaps a little angry.

They apparently assumed Jesus' body had been stolen—that is what John tells us that Mary Magdalene thought (cf. 20:13).

The empty tomb simply intensified their distress ... as no doubt it would us. So, the women were bewildered.

SECONDLY, THE WOMEN WERE REBUKED

While they were wondering about this ... **“utterly at a loss”** ... suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them.

In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground.

The resplendent male figures were angels, and they cast an entirely new light on the matter. Please excuse the pun.

They radiated the splendour of God.

Understandably, the women were overcome with fear ... and bowed down ... until their faces were on the ground ... as a sign of respect ... and perhaps for the avoidance of the bright light.

And do you notice this was very similar to the conversion of Paul,

Acts 9:4 He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”

While the women bowed, one of the angels voiced a devastating rebuke, **“Why do you look for the living among the dead?” (v. 5b).**

They were accused of coming to anoint a lifeless Jesus ... when they should have known ... he would rise from the dead.

To the angels ... it was scandalous ... to look for Jesus in the grave.

And allow me to say ... that similarly ... it is a scandal ... for all resurrection-denying churches, clergy or Christians ... to look for Jesus “among the dead.”

It seems these resurrection denying people love the example of the dead Jesus.

They preach his courage, his conviction, and even his faith.

Sentimentality fills their sermons ... with language about ... a recurrent spring making hope eternal, ... about a butterfly discarding its chrysalis.

But the R word is never used, except metaphorically.

You see ... we should note ... the women were rebuked ... for looking for Jesus among the dead.

And, today, we are rebuked if we believe that Christ's bones are in buried in Jerusalem.

We are rebuked ... if we weave a sentimental religious story ... of false hope ... if our Jesus is a dead Jesus.

**THE WOMEN WERE BEWILDERED,
REBUKED AND THIRDLY THEY WERE
INSTRUCTED**

Happily, the rebuke set the stage for the angels' proclamation of the joyous Easter message: **“He is not here; he his risen!” (v. 6a)** - or more accurately, **“he has been raised!”**

With the astounding truth ... like skyrocketing and exploding fireworks in the night sky ... the angel said

“ ‘Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: “The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, be crucified and on the third day be raised

again.” ’ Then they remembered his words”
(vv. 6b–8).

You see, the angel challenged them to remember
the prophecies of his death ... and resurrection ...
that he had made back in Galilee.

These prophecies were explicit.

So, we note that ... right after Peter’s great
confession of Christ, Jesus said in **Luke 9:22; cf.**
Matthew 16:21,

**“The Son of Man must suffer many things and
be rejected by the elders, chief priests and
teachers of the law, and he must be killed and
on the third day be raised to life”**

Also, immediately after the Transfiguration, he
said to his apostles, “ **‘The Son of Man is going
to be betrayed into the hands of men. They
will kill him, and after three days he will rise.’**”

But interestingly, at that time they did not understand what he meant ... and were too afraid to ask him ... see Mark 9:31, 32; cf. Matthew 17:22, 23.

But now ... the light in their minds ... and their spirits ... was switched on.

The great truth here for us ... is that the significance of the Resurrection ... is inseparable ... from Jesus' prophetic words ... about his death and resurrection.

It is the teaching of Christ ... that makes sense ... of everything.

The very structure of the final chapter of Luke makes this clear.

Luke 24 recounts three episodes

1. **Firstly**, as we have considered, the women's encounter with the angels at the empty tomb (vv. 1–12),
2. **Secondly**, the encounter of two disciples on the road to Emmaus (vv. 13–35), and
3. **Thirdly**, Jesus' appearance to his disciples in Jerusalem (vv. 36–49).

Significantly, all three episodes are structured in the same way: bewilderment, rebuke, instruction, and witness.

And please notice the instruction section ... in all three episodes ... consists of a call to
remember the words of Christ.

Here the women were told:

“Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: ‘The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.’ Then they remembered his words. (vv. 6b–8)

And on the Emmaus road, the risen Jesus chided the two disciples:

“How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. (vv. 25–27)

And then in Jerusalem, the risen Christ instructed the whole apostolic band:

“This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.”

Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.

He told them,

“This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day.” (vv. 44–46)

The prophetic word from Jesus ... and throughout the entire corpus of the Bible ... is central to the gospel.

Jesus' atoning death ... is fully understood ... only in the light of the Old Testament.

His resurrection ... is only understandable ... in conjunction ... with his prophetic teaching.

In point of fact, those who had rejected the teaching of scripture rejected the Resurrection, just as Jesus had taught they would:

“ ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead’ ” (16:31).

This means that we are to be people of the whole Book: the Old and the New Testament.

We are to study scripture!

And only then ... will our minds and hearts ... begin to embrace the massive dimensions of Christ and his resurrection.

A FEW CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

A grand truth emerges from Easter: and that is the disciples did not invent the resurrection story.

At first, they neither understood it ... nor believed it.

You will be interested to observe ... that none of the Gospels ... tells us how Jesus was resurrected ... because none of the Gospel authors ... saw it.

They were not myth-makers ... but witnesses to the risen Christ.

In Alexander Maclaren's words, "The evidential value of the disciples' slowness to believe cannot be overrated."¹

The only reasonable explanation for the disciples' devotion, even at the cost of their own lives, is:

- They saw the empty tomb.
- They met their risen Lord.
- And they came to believe the scriptures:

“... that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, [and] that

¹ Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scriptures* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1971), p. 322.¹

**he was raised on the third day according to
the Scriptures” 1 Corinthians 15:3,4**

AMEN