

O happy day! Easter Sunday 2014

Readings: Acts 10:34 – 43, Matthew 28:1 – 10

Welcome to our service today.

In 1559 a law was enacted saying that everyone had to attend church each week or be fined 12 pence (about £14 today). While that law was repealed special feast days remained compulsory in the Anglican Church for a lot longer; days like Christmas and Easter. Of course you are all here today because you want to be here right?

Let's pray – Risen, living Jesus be with us. Speak with us. Show us your love and your reality. Amen

This week we held a funeral in this church for someone well-loved. Ngaire Smith was buried at the Richmond cemetery on Wednesday. At a funeral I always read at a funeral: God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16) Ngaire was prepared for death because she had faith in the risen Christ. Death was not the final word for her.

Hope for life after death is not pie in the sky. It is realistic and well-founded. It's not just for the religious lot. Peter, the one who followed Jesus, then denied him, then followed him again, gave a sermon to people outside of the Jewish faith. They were amazed to hear that we can all have peace with God through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. Acts 10:35 Peter went on to tell them how "God raised him to life on the third day. Then God allowed him to appear ....to us .... We ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead." Acts 10:40  
- 41

Imagine if you went to the cemetery to visit someone who had recently died and was buried there. When you arrived at the site, you saw a mound of earth

where earth should not be. The casket was uncovered. Fearfully you tiptoe to the edge and see that the lid is off! But there is no-one in the casket.

Whew! But where is the person? You're feeling really freaked out now! That's what it was like for Mary. You can imagine her thoughts going round in circles. "What am I supposed to do?" And then Mary saw the angel who announces that Jesus, who was crucified, had risen. Waves of relief and joy wash over her. Imagine how you would feel if someone you loved was not dead after all.

That joy was magnified many, many times for the women who discovered the truth about Jesus. Jesus was not just someone they loved. They expected he would save the whole world. As Mary experienced intense joy, so can we. We too can know the joy of Jesus' resurrection and the power of his risen life with us in the here and now.

People have different opinions about whether Jesus was literally raised from the dead. What do you think? The number of people in Western society who believe in Jesus' literal resurrection is declining. Even people in some churches think the resurrection is a spiritual, not a physical reality.

Does it matter? Actually it does.

1 Corinthians 15:14 – 19 ..if Christ has not been raised, then all our preaching is useless, and your faith is useless. ... And if Christ has not been raised, then your faith is useless and you are still guilty of your sins. In that case, all who have died believing in Christ are lost! And if our hope in Christ is only for this life, we are more to be pitied than anyone in the world.

Our faith is dead and useless if we merely follow a good example rather than a living person. So let's consider briefly the evidence.

First Jesus was definitely dead. The Roman soldiers were experienced executioners. They certified him dead. They decided not to break his legs (customary practice to speed up death in crucifixion), because they saw the 'blood and water' coming from his pierced side. Only after death does the blood separate into cells and serum. John 19:33 & 34

Secondly, the body was gone from the tomb. If the Jews had taken it, they would have produced it as soon as talk of resurrection began. If the disciples had taken Jesus' body, they wouldn't die for a lie.

Thirdly lots of people saw Jesus after his resurrection. Mary, the twelve disciples, the followers on the Emmaus Road, Paul and around 500 others (1 Cor 15:6) became convinced when they saw him. This evidence is found in the Biblical record.

Some people say the Biblical record isn't correct because the stories differ at some points. Actually those eye witness differences point to the truth of Jesus' resurrection. When things aren't true, people get together to make sure their stories align completely. The fact that some details are different point to the reliability of the different witnesses perspectives.

The cold, hard facts point to Jesus rising from the dead. But we are not all left-brainers and facts are not the whole story. Any story is made up of facts and feelings. Unless we understand both, we only have a partial understanding of the situation.

This is where Mary and the other women can help us. They loved Jesus dearly. They, like the others, were gutted when he was killed. They had witnessed his death on the cross themselves as they stood at a distance.

When Mary and the other women realised that Jesus was alive they were ecstatic. They were very frightened but also filled with great joy. Mat 28:8

They rushed to tell Jesus mates and on the way, who should they encounter but Jesus himself!

After some blissful time with him, they rush on to tell the others they have met their friend and Saviour. Mark's version of the story tells us that the others were not so convinced immediately. Women's testimony was not to be relied on back then. But Jesus later showed himself to them.

Why does it matter if Jesus was literally raised from the dead? Because the whole Christian message hinges on this fact. Jesus death and resurrection bring the possibility of freedom and hope for all of humanity.

I quote an author named Brian McLaren here:

For death is not the last word.

Violence is not the last word.

Hate is not the last word.

Money is not the last word.

Intimidation is not the last word.

Political power is not the last word.

Condemnation is not the last word.

Betrayal and failure are not the last word.

No: each of them are left like rags in a tomb,

And from that tomb, Arises Christ, Alive.

The facts are clear if we take the time to look at them. Jesus rose from the dead. One journalist was not at all convinced so he spent a great deal of time and effort to speak to experts and check out the evidence for himself; Biblical and secular. That journalist is now a Christian. You can read the evidence in *The Case for Christ*. The author is Lee Strobel.

Strobel is a left brainer. He found out the evidence then had to decide what he would do with that evidence. He drew up a list of the pros and cons of becoming a Christ follower. The pros won.

I too am a left brainer, just. I rather think that I don't rely on my feelings but I do know that feelings are important too. As a teenager I knew one day I would become a Christian; not until I had done my own thing first though. One day I encountered the living Lord Jesus. I felt the depth of his love for me. That love was the most powerful thing I have ever felt. All that was in my power then was to choose to follow him.

What do you think about Jesus and the resurrection? Have you encountered the reality of his love? Jesus is alive. Jesus wants you to live with him; after you die yes; but also in the here and now.

All you have to do is say "Yes" to him. There are lots of ways to do that. Soon we will have Communion. During this time we remember the facts of Jesus death and resurrection. We also experience again Jesus love – we actually meet the Risen Christ in this symbolic meal.

It doesn't matter what your denomination is, or whether you normally attend church, you are welcome to share Communion with us. If you want to respond to Jesus' love for the first time or as an on-going commitment, then do come forward for Communion. Jesus wants to touch your life afresh.