



'A World Transformed, A Life of Hope'

Luke 24:1-12

Last night, at Harty church, on the tip of Sheppey, with the wind howling, lit by candles, warmed by one another, we celebrated the light of Christ that, full of joy and hope, we carry into a world of fear and darkness. In the shadow of Brussels, with the memory of Srebrenica, hope can seem far far away. People here will feel hope has faded because of illness, bereavement, unemployment, money worries, family breakdown. When hope fails, fear draws close, and whispers sly deceptions in our minds.

On Easter Day hope decisively overcame fear and Christians are called to be witnesses to the hope that is found only in Jesus Christ.

Fear is reasonable, a normal human reaction. This week has shocked all of us, and risks causing us to act fearfully, to see a world in which fear triumphs. Easter proclaims to us in flesh and blood that fear and death and terror are not the last words. God has spoken life, hope and purpose. Terror speaks of a world at war with itself, of Faiths at each others' throats. Jesus Christ reaches out not in exclusion but in embrace. This is the feast of the victory of God, and we celebrate in the midst of darkness, by our worship and praise shining an unquenchable light.

That is the light the women encountered as, full of sorrow and despair, they went to the tomb. They had watched Jesus, whom they had accompanied from Galilee, arrested, tried and executed, in the space of a few hours. All expectation was betrayed, all achievement obliterated by the evil acts of powerful and indifferent rulers.

When the whole stream of events flows the wrong way then it is hard to endure, hard to trust the victory of God. That is the reality for so many. There is a sense of the emptiness of life, of a spiral of decline. Life may get better occasionally, but only to get worse. Darkness falls, the morning may come, but then another night.

So it was for the women who had endured everything with Jesus. They had seen miracles. They had shared his rejection and his hardships. They had walked the roads with him. They had experienced Palm Sunday and the cleansing of the Temple. Bright dawn had broken, new hope blossomed. Now it was gone. Many will identify with that.

It is not only through events that there is temptation to cynical despair, losing sight of the reality of purpose and achievement which is the gift of God's creation.

Economically, things go up and down. One problem may be overcome but others rush in to fill the gap. Whether it is as individuals seeking to hold on to jobs, or as Governments seeking to make things better, the pressure never diminishes, the problems queue up to present themselves.

Then God steps in at that first Easter and the world changes. The news of Easter isn't about the cycles of life, of how spring follows winter. There is nothing natural about resurrection. At Easter God is completely disrupting the pattern of life and death.

Resurrection is an act of God. Like all acts of God it asks us questions.

“Why do you look for the living among the dead?” The women had no categories for what they were part of.

Imagine if those who built this cathedral more than 800 years ago were to be given a smart phone, or see an airplane fly through the sky or be taken to the cinema to see a film... They would have nothing in their experience to help them comprehend what was going on.

The women obey the normal rules of life and death. They find a God-shaped event that opens the door to a new world of hope, hope that is outside of ourselves, not based on our own capacities or capabilities but on God.

They carried to the tomb the spices to embalm his dead body. But they didn't need them. I wonder what kind of things we are carrying this Easter Sunday that we don't need to carry, because Jesus is alive?

To all of us in every time and place and fear and situation, Easter day proclaims that God who raises the dead is more real, more powerful than anything we encounter.

“Who is this for?” The primary witnesses of Easter are those who are marginal in the culture, on the very edges of society of that day - women, the poor. Given the importance that we in society give to celebrity endorsements this is a little disconcerting. The resurrection of Jesus is for all people everywhere, most of all for the poor, the despairing, the forgotten and abandoned.

Resurrection life is springing up all over this world. In Burundi three weeks ago Caroline and I arrived at a smallish, fairly makeshift church in a poor area, packed to the doors. Inside we heard testimony of the suffering of the local people in the violence that had prevailed there - one who'd been shot, another beaten, many threatened. Each morning bodies were found in ditches.

I did what I have learned is the best thing to do when among followers of Jesus Christ, however bad their circumstances, whether in that church or in a refugee camp the next day, and spoke about Jesus Christ, alive.

Because it was Jesus Christ that was being spoken about and it was being translated. Quiet fell, broken later by rifle fire and grenades. At the end, we sang again, and the place lifted in worship, drums playing, people dancing. This was Christianity, living out Easter hope in the face of darkness, unquenched, unquenchable.

In Sittingbourne deanery there is a community bank where children come in and learn how to save; a food bank, people come in for soup and bread at lunch. This was a church building more used today than at any time since it was built.

Easter is good news for the poor, for those on the edge. Easter is good news for governments and leaders, stretched and struggling in the face of infinite need, who see no way forward that avoids disappointment, no way that is safe. Easter is news that says God rules; we all may find hope and courage.

“Will you be a witness to this? This hope wasn’t just for the women..... they had to run to tell others. Their witness was rejected, as ours often will be. Yet they persevered and because God is behind all this it spread, was believed, changed the whole world. In our Acts reading Peter witnesses to it to Cornelius miles away and years later.

Every single Christian is invited, commanded, compelled to witness that Jesus is alive. In Isaiah the vision is even wider – this is about the whole world changing – a new creation for the world. It gets no bigger than this.

We are witnesses to this now, now when witness is more needed than ever. Jesus is alive. Hope is unleashed on the world. We are not left hopeless, despairing and lost. Instead there has been a miracle of God in the place of death. Our future isn’t simply the product of our past. The risen Jesus has recreated all things.

On Sheppey last night, in the storm, here today in grandeur, in Burundi, facing war, in Brussels, living with terror, in the Balkans, looking for reconciliation, at home or in hospital or prison, struggling with a myriad of fears - there is the same news. For all of us, at the empty tomb is hope. Uncontainable hope. We are its witnesses, go and tell.

