

Sunday 14th April - The New Life of Easter

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[0 : 00] So we've got a kind of standalone session today because we haven't got a sermon series at the moment. So I thought we might just talk a little bit broadly about one of the resurrection stories.

Now, I really like it when you see the new leaves at Easter time, because I think after a long, dark winter, it can feel a bit like things are grim and death-like.

And then you see those new shoots. I remember, I mean, I'm not a Boris Johnson fan, but I like the phrase, the crocus of hope is coming up. For some reason, that does feel real to me, seeing those beginnings of those really bright green leaves.

It does remind me of the new life. And I guess that is the world that God has made for us, a world where there are sometimes these seasons where things seem impossible.

But in the end, the end of the story is always that there is life after death. There is hope. There will be new life, even when winter feels long and dark.

[1 : 06] And thinking about that a bit today, we're going to talk about Mark's Gospel. Now, we're going to look at it in a second. But Mark's Gospel is a tricky one.

So it really depends which version of the Bible you read. But if you have a modern translation, by what I mean the New International Version or the New Revised Standard Version, it says at the end, this is the original ending.

And then there's a bit in italics afterwards, which is the ending that someone else has put on afterwards, because they thought, that's not satisfactory. They've missed out all of these bits. So we've got kind of two endings to Mark's Gospel, possibly more than two.

And sometimes people find that first ending, because it just kind of stops in a slightly scary place, a bit tricky. But I think, I'm hoping that today I will convince you that while I totally appreciate the second ending of Mark's Gospel, and believe in those resurrection appearances, of course, but I find the first ending quite meaningful too.

It's quite a nice place to stop, as well as an uncomfortable place to stop. So we're going to watch this first ending of Mark's Gospel now. When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome, bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body.

[2 : 27] Very early, on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb, and they asked each other, who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?

But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed. Don't be alarmed, he said.

You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen. He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter.

He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you. Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb.

[3 : 30] They said nothing to anyone. What a place to end it, right? Because, of course, we know that they did say something to someone, or else we wouldn't be here this morning.

So, I always think Mark's Gospel is a really interesting one. Right from the start, it moves really fast. Everything happens immediately. Jesus seems to be in this massive rush. And then at the end, we're left in a conundrum, because all of the manuscripts stop in different places, and some of them stop here, with the women running away in fear, not saying anything to anyone.

Others have the resurrection narrative, which is a bit longer, and also very beautiful. But many of the ancient manuscripts stop there. I think both endings, this original ending and the other one, are honoured in the life of the church.

And they both have something important to tell us about the resurrection, about humanity, and about God. But today, we're mostly going to look at this short ending. The two Marys and Salome come to embalm Jesus' body with herbs and spices.

They've forgotten, perhaps, that a disreputable woman in Bethany has already anointed Jesus' body for death. Or perhaps they didn't feel comfortable with leading it like that.

[4 : 53] You remember the woman who pours the perfume over Jesus' feet. It's a particular kind of love to tend to a dead body. When faced with the body of someone you've loved, it can be important to hold them, to be close to them in that death, to hold their face, to remember that they really were there.

They really touched your life. So perhaps that's what these women are doing. They've come to see Jesus' body, to have that final, tender goodbye. To see it is true.

And I guess with the body, even when you know someone's gone to a better place, seeing that it is treated with respect feels important. It's how you remember, deeply coded into your body, that they existed, that you loved them, that they were important and present.

So they go in, ready to do the hard work of mourning, ready to do the intense and tender loving of Jesus' body. But instead of finding the body of a man they loved, they find an empty tomb and a troubling angel.

And the angel does start, like all angels do, with do not be alarmed. And they still are. I guess angels must be quite frightening. I guess when you think about all of the encounters you've had with deep holiness, they can be a little bit jarring at first, because you think, whoa.

[6 : 19] And the angel promises that the disciples will meet the risen Jesus, back in Galilee, where it all started. We see, in spite of the fact that just a couple of days, Peter rejected Jesus, said, I don't know him, three times before the cock crow, the message from the angel is addressed to Peter, Peter and the disciples.

And that kind of assures Peter of his relationship with God. God is forgiving. After death, all the things that have happened have just slid off God's back. Peter is restored.

And that is a really important truth, isn't it? One of the things about Easter is that it's hopeful.

Relationships can be restored. God doesn't hold what you have against you.

There is new life and new hope. You can be assured that God will not hold a grudge, that God will reach out to be back in relationship with you, if you just choose to.

And the women hear these good news, and we hear from Mark that they are absolutely terrified. They run from the tomb, and we're told that they don't stop and tell anyone about what they've seen.

[7 : 31] Now, in Mark's gospel, Jesus then appears to Mary, and then to Peter, and then to the disciples, so they gradually find out about it afterwards. But these women just run from the tomb.

Even though we know the good news, and we know the story goes on, it feels like a difficult place to stop with these scared women. But perhaps it's also an important place to stop.

Because I don't believe for one moment that Mark doesn't know how the story ends, that Mark doesn't know about the resurrection appearances. But there's something here that I think Mark wants to capture.

And I think one of the things that he wants to capture is that sometimes really good news, really exciting news, can be difficult.

You can receive it, and instead of feeling overwhelmed with joy and excitement, you can feel scared, because things are changing. Sometimes good news, the hope, can be difficult to lean into, especially when it's new and it's unexpected.

[8 : 32] And this must have been so unexpected. They've gone through the process of loss. It's been three days. They must be beginning to process the fact that Jesus has died.

They've finally gathered up the courage to go and anoint his body, even though it's a little bit late, and it probably would already stink if it had been in the grave. And then they are presented with this completely other truth.

God is not dead. God is waiting for them in Galilee. And they've met an angel in the tomb. And that's huge too, because meeting angels is never really very comfortable.

They always change your life, give you news that's going to change the way you look at things. And I think that's still true today, even though we know coming here as Christians that God has conquered death, that that can sometimes be quite difficult to get our heads around.

And it must have been so much harder in that time. Because if you think about it, one of the great truths of the Jewish faith is that God is not present in death.

[9 : 39] So they have all of these purity rituals, which are essentially about the fact that God is life. And God is not there. So if you touch a dead body, you have to be purified before you go to the temple.

If you menstruate and don't have a child, so you lose the potential of life, you have to be purified and go to a temple. And there's this great deep belief in Judaism that God is not there in death. And then we see Jesus die and get resurrected. And God has died. So there's no place in heaven or on earth that God is not. Because God has died. God is there in death.

There is no place that is so dark that there isn't God there. And I think that truth, that kind of resurrection truth, that sense of hope and resurrection, is something we all kind of struggle with living.

Because I think in society, we often are encouraged to live life without reaching out for the new thing, without reaching out for hope. We have all kinds of places in life where they say, don't think about new life, don't think about hope, but learn your place and stay where you are.

[10 : 47] I think we have schools that often tell you to learn your place, relationships which box you in and prevent you from feeling hope, from being yourself. And even just the daily grind can keep that resurrection truth, that freedom away from you, because the day feels inevitable rather than miraculous.

And yet each day we're given a new day by God so that we might live life and live it to the full. And I think I see this a lot in my work when I visit the Pathway Refuge, which is a refuge for victims of domestic violence.

People come to the refuge, and one of the big consequences of the abuse they've suffered, whether it's physical or mental or other ways, is that the abuse makes them feel so small that they don't feel like they deserve to be surprised or to feel joy or to go out and do new things or experiment.

I think one of the things I find quite shocking is that when they first arrive, a lot of the women don't even really feel comfortable going for a walk on their own or going to the shops on their own, because prior to that, they've often had a relationship where someone said, no, you can't do that without me, or you can't do that unless I tell you you can go.

So their abuser has kind of checked up on them so much that they feel afraid of being free, really, feel afraid of living that life that we are given, given in the resurrection, afraid of the vulnerability that lets you feel happy and fulfilled.

[12 : 20] And I guess when you've experienced things going wrong, a bit like the women at the tomb did, when you're experiencing things going wrong a lot, and that's a huge way it went wrong.

I mean, the person they were following, seeing as the Messiah was killed, it can be easy to step away from happiness to disaster planning, because it's gone wrong once, right?

So how's it going to go wrong again? Jesus is back. Will they catch him and they kill him again? If I get caught, will I get found? Do I dare go to the shops? What happens when I get home?

And that can kind of prevent you from being able to feel free and feel joy, because you're afraid the joy won't last, so you don't let it happen.

You're afraid you might look silly if you reach out and look happy about something, and then it's taken away. And I think how we learn to live that Easter joy, which obviously the women weren't in a place where they could do on that Easter morning, is a really important spiritual question, because being willing to be vulnerable, to step out of your space, of your comfort zone, is the only way that you can feel that Easter joy.

[13 : 34] You say, what if I step out and let this happy thing happen to me? Or I find sometimes when I'm looking at my baby, it can be possible to think, what's going wrong with her now?

How's she going to be ill? Or what will happen to her in the future? Instead of looking at her and just feeling overwhelmed with love, you can sit there and think, well, what's going to go wrong? And that's kind of rejecting the new life that's in front of me.

It's rejecting that joy, because joy takes vulnerability. When you lean into thinking, wow, this is amazing, you also risk having that thing taken away from you.

And I don't think you need to be a victim of domestic violence to know that. Lots of people know what it is to be afraid of the vulnerability that lets you feel joy, to cling so closely to safety and

normality that you don't have space to feel happy, to know that there is new life, to feel free. Lots of people feel like that just if their job isn't going that well, because that kind of grinds you down and underestimates you feel less dignified, less able to be vulnerable.

[14 : 39] Or perhaps things are going really well and you just get scared that they're not going to stay that way. And that prevents you from feeling the joy of that as well.

Or perhaps other things can make you feel boxed in and unable to be vulnerable and appreciate joy. Perhaps not connecting well to the people around you, not feeling like you have relationships where you can step out and trust people to be vulnerable.

Or being afraid of big financial things happening. That takes up a lot of your bandwidth and stops you from being able to feel free, to feel happy.

And this is something that the women at the tomb will have known. They were living under violent Roman occupation in fear. Women in a very male-dominated world.

Believing in Jesus when he challenged the authorities and he kept disrupting people and he kept challenging corruptions in their own community as well. These women will have been used to running away from dangerous situations.

[15 : 43] And sometimes those will have been dangerous situations that Jesus brought upon them by stirring pots that perhaps other people wouldn't dare to stir. They will be used to having bolt holds to hide from difficult situations and planning for the worst case scenario.

And after all, the worst case scenario has just happened to them. Jesus has been taken and crucified by the Romans. And then they get this good news. This amazing good news that God has overcome death.

That Jesus, who they saw being crucified, is still there. This extraordinary news which will change their lives forever. Perhaps make them more vulnerable in many ways.

But also, when they think they've lost the thing that they were living for, it's given it back. So they may just have started to process and think, well, what will I do with my lives now?

And then suddenly God bursts back into life. And I guess that it must also be pretty scary because if Jesus' followers were persecuted when he was just an itinerant rabbi, imagine how much more they will be persecuted now they talk of a God who has been risen from the dead.

[16 : 55] Christians are going to stand out more, not less, in the future. And I guess with Jesus coming back, they'll also feel scared, you know, I've just gone through losing you and I don't know that I can do it again.

So the women don't know what to do. They do what we all do sometimes. They run away because the situation is too hard. And I think it does ask us a question.

What do we have to do so that we don't run away when we're confronted with good news? What do we have to do so that we can meet joy, God, in the joy and the promise of new life and resurrection?

So that we're ready to hear the news of resurrection and cope with the vulnerability of having this amazing God who does turn things upside down? How can we live so we can hear the good news that terrified the women?

So we can appreciate joy when we see new life and not just worry about that new life passing away. And I guess that is a really fundamental question because one of the things that Jesus did by defeating death so it wasn't the end was to promise that there is another way of living, a way of living which lives life to the full that doesn't live with the fear of things going wrong or the fear of death, but also promises new life to all the people around you.

[18 : 21] And I think this partly calls us that we need to be brave to be vulnerable, be brave and step out of our comfort zones, be willing to do things that fail and go wrong and then try again because that's how you reach that fulfillment and happiness that makes new life possible.

That's how you are free. If you're free to fail, then you are truly free. If you're only free to succeed, then you're in a tiny box. And here in the ending of Mark's Gospel, perhaps we also get a little hint of how we live this vulnerable, brave life.

Because Mark's Gospel says that Jesus is waiting for the disciples back in Galilee. Back in Galilee where it all began. Now I'm quite sure that that is true and that Jesus was waiting for there in Galilee.

But for us reading today, it's also an invitation. An invitation back to the beginning. Because one of the ways that we find strength for hope and vulnerability is when we remember all the good things

that have happened, all the things that we have overcome, all the wonders that God has shown us in Jesus' life.

When we take time to remember the trials and tribulations we have overcome together as Easter people. And this is the challenge. You need to live this life.

[19 : 50] You need to be willing to hear it, vulnerable to accept it, because things change. Beautiful things don't always last forever. Sometimes they shift and they die, so new life is possible.

And I think that in this Easter invitation, we need to remember that that is the offer now, as well as back then. Jesus came to offer us life.

But to appreciate that, it's important to actually try and live the life that we're given. That's how you make more people see and want to know about the new life that Jesus offers.

So we have this invitation to go back to the beginning, to remember with gratitude all of the good things that have happened, even in our lives, not just in Jesus' life.

The good things that you have overcome, the times when heartache didn't win, the difficulties you overcame, the bravenesses of stepping out each day, even though there are challenges.

[20 : 48] Every day that you get up and try is a victory in many ways. But also the good things that we know about God throughout the whole of the love story that God has written us in the scriptures.

And the testimonies of people around us. It's kind of a love song that we're all singing to each other because sometimes it can be difficult to see the joy, but we all have some lines that we can sing to each other to help us all remember it as a community.

Because Easter joy, joy and resurrection, isn't always something that we can choose to experience ourselves, but as a community, we can always remember it.

And that's because joy is a bit like this baby word. It is terrifying and vulnerable and yet also beautiful and perfect. When we feel joy, it always comes in a place of vulnerability.

It's beauty and fragility and impermanence that are all wrapped up in one experience. Because joy is a bright spark. We can't lock it down and control it.

[21 : 54] It's just a moment that feeds us and lets us on. And because we can't control it, it makes us feel vulnerable. When we can't tolerate that level of vulnerability, we try and say, we see this joy coming towards us and we say, you won't catch us off guard.

You'll not hit me with pain by disappearing suddenly or dying. I'll be prepared and ready for you. So I'm going to not lean into this so I can't deal with the pain of it being taken away.

And that snaps us out of the joy and the connection and the understanding of it. And we snap out of it because vulnerability leaves us open to being hurt. So we can be afraid of feeling joy, afraid of taking joy in something that might die and not flourish.

But leaning in to feel the joy of new life, this beautiful, perfect life that is beautiful and perfect however long it lasts. This new love, new beauty, even if it's just one joyful, singing, fleeting moment, a singular breath.

That is a roadmap towards God in so many ways. God's seen in the fragile new baby birds, new leaves on the trees, that brief moment of warm light in the morning and the extraordinary truth which is sometimes difficult to comprehend that God has overcome death so there's nothing we need to fear.

[23 : 13] So how do we do this? Well I think the main way we do it is by treasuring the good news when we hear about it. And that's not just the big good news, God's good news. It's all the small stories of resurrection in people's lives.

All those amazing times when people were brave enough to step out beyond fear. All those ladies of the shelter who chose not to be limited or controlled but to be free and to have a good go at living their life.

Every time someone who struggles to get up in the morning because they have chronic pain but does get up and does come to church, that is a resurrection. We need to remember all those times when God has reached in and pulled people out of the graves that they find themselves in.

And we also need to remember in our own lives all those small, seemingly insignificant encounters with God because God has healing in God's wings and all of those encounters stack up to something extraordinary.

God who always welcomes us with compassion and open arms. Even if those little moments seem foolish, like the kind of thing that you can't explain to other people but you saw God there in a moment of kindness or in the grandness of a mountain or the sweet, unexpected tickle of a breeze.

[24 : 30] Looking back on those moments of joy and gladness, connection, moments of God and resurrection, we need to look back at them with gratitude. And that's not just a good way of living. It's a way of enabling you to be resilient enough to reach out to joy and love and life again. There's a great quote by a Catholic priest that says, it's not joy that makes us grateful, it's gratitude that makes us joyful.

And that's true. Looking back, remembering the story, remembering deliberately all the good that has been on the path that you've been on. Remembering all the things that you've overcome to get here, that helps you feel resilient enough to be brave.

And that makes it possible to lean into Easter joy, to lean into connection and love and God. And I think that's what Mark points us to with this short ending.

It's kind of like a treasure map. You've heard the good news. How do you live it? How do you accept the extraordinary good news of the empty tomb? How do you accept this gift of life in all its fullness and live this Easter life in your life today?

[25 : 43] And Mark says, start by going back. Go back to Galilee. sit in the wonder and the love of God in his life on earth. Meet Jesus again and remember all that he is.

And from that, take the strength to live the good news, to lean into joy even if it feels vulnerable, and to grow into the Easter people we are all called to be.

Amen. God Dasen