

St Botolph's Church Worthing
Easter Morning
Luke 24:1-12
Father Roger Walker

If you ask any Police officer they will tell you that eyewitness accounts of the same event can differ very considerably, and this is true of Jesus' resurrection. Each of the four Gospels has different details, but – apart from the fact that Jesus' body was no longer there - they all agree on three things:

1. That there was an angelic presence – some say two
2. That Mary Magdalene and the women were the first to see the empty tomb
3. That Peter – with or without John – was the first apostle to come to the tomb.

And, typical of Peter, he was not sure what had happened. This puzzlement seems strange when Jesus had specifically told His disciples that he was going to be killed and rise again on the third day. None of them – neither the women nor the apostles seem to have expected this actually to happen. We can only suppose that, after the elation of events of Palm Sunday – the horror of Jesus' betrayal, trial and execution had so affected them that they could not look for anything positive.

For us it is so different: from the moment we celebrated Palm Sunday we know that, despite the sadness of Good Friday, everything was going to turn out well. So let's forgive the disciples their initial failure to understand, because very soon they did come to a realisation of what God had done, and just seven weeks later – after Pentecost – were boldly proclaiming Jesus, risen from the dead, and all that could mean for those who accepted this.

We are here today because we believe that Jesus died on the cross and rose from the dead on the third day. In biblical phraseology we believe that He died for our sins and rose again for our justification. So as we rejoice today, what is the Resurrection of Jesus saying to us? First of all, it is an affirmation of what human beings – right back into prehistory – have always sought but never been totally confident of – that some part of us survives the death of the body. Archaeologists excavating burial sites almost always find evidence of this hope, but never until Jesus was there a certainty that this can be so – and that it can be gloriously so.

In the Old Testament there is the belief that we survive death – but there was nothing joyful about the gloomy underworld of Sheol, as it was called. Jesus – firstly by his Transfiguration and then by his resurrection appearances to His disciples – when He could come and go through locked doors and be in more than one place at once – shows us that we can have this as well. That, in the words of Philippians 3, Jesus has the power to transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like His glorious body: words that stand at the heart of the Funeral service: and that our citizenship will be in heaven.

We can act and speak sometimes as if Jesus has done this for everyone, and indeed He does desire it for everyone, but – and there is a big but in the Bible, for us to have confidence in this eternal life God asks us to turn from sin and believe in Jesus Christ.

This is the message of the New Testament, from the first Christian sermon in Acts where the crowd asks 'what shall we do?' and the answer is 'repent and be baptised', right through to the end of St John's Gospel. Those are probably the last words of the Bible to be written, where St John concludes saying 'these words are written that you may believe Jesus is the Christ – the Son of God – and believe you may have eternal life in His name'.

John also wrote the most important words in the whole Bible – John 3: 16 – the words of God's New Testament as the New Covenant with us. The words mean the same and signify a promise with a condition attached to it: so we read 'God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him' (Jesus) - that's the condition – 'shall not perish but have eternal life' (the promise). And of course, although the Bible does not actually say this, there is the obvious corollary to this that 'whoever does not believe in Jesus shall perish and shall not have eternal life'.

Easter is a time to affirm our saving belief in Jesus Christ that gives us our confidence in eternal life with God, but also to realise that this faith is not just something that we accept with our minds. It also asks of us a new and better life, that we repent and go another way. This new and better life was summed up for us by Jesus very simply when He said – John 13:34 – 'a new commandment I give to you – that you love one another as I have loved you'. Again, when He says – Matthew 23:37 – 'love the Lord your God, and love your neighbour as yourself'. So we come today with a sure faith that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead and God is reminding us that we must put that faith into practice, in our Church and in our Community.

AMEN

Father Roger Walker

27.3.16