

Sermon for Easter Day at Holy Trinity Geneva on 20 April 2025

Texts: Isaiah 25.6-9; Acts 10.34-43; Luke 24.1-12

‘Why do you look for the living among the dead?’ (Luke 24. 5)

One of my favourite children’s story is ‘*The Very Hungry Caterpillar*’. The caterpillar is full of hunger and eats its way relentlessly through everything in its path, leaves, tomato, melon and even cake, and pizza. In the process, it becomes bigger and bigger until it becomes encased in the tomb-like form of a chrysalis. But in the end, it breaks out of the shell of the chrysalis to become a glorious, multi-coloured butterfly that soars to freedom.

It’s a fitting image for this glorious Easter morning as we celebrate the greatest transformation in human history – the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. In offering his life for our sins on the Cross, Jesus has conquered the powers of sin and death through the grace of God who raised him to new life. Through his resurrection, he has transformed the cross from the place to which the evil of our hatred, anger, jealousy had nailed him in crucifixion, to become instead, a place of healing, hope and deliverance for each one of us and for the world.

This why we proclaim with joy today. “He is risen. Alleluia”. The tomb is empty. Jesus has been set free to new life. This is why everything today resounds with our joy – our triumphant Easter liturgy and music, the cross which is now flowering with life, the Easter eggs which are a symbol of that new life.

But in the midst of our joy today as we celebrate Easter, we may well have questions as to how the resurrection of Jesus affects me. When the joy of this day and Eastertide season is over, how will the resurrection of Jesus make a difference to me? How, at all, can it help me with the multitude of problems and issues within which, we all struggle with in different ways in our daily lives?

For each one of us here, I would strongly suspect, is struggling with things which feel difficult and make us feel trapped. It may be guilt about things we’ve done which make us extremely uncomfortable or those things we know we ought to have done but failed to do. It may be anger we experience in relationships which have gone sour. It may be grief either at the loss of a loved one or at changes we’re facing in our life both of which feel hard to bear. It may be fears about our future and those dear to us in a world which feels daily more uncertain. It may be a sense we are not in control but are thrall to addictions which are controlling us.

Well, the good news today is that Jesus is calling each one of us to new life in Him and can help us find the way whatever our current context. We can begin to grasp this by looking at what happened to Jesus’ own disciples. For each one of them at the point of his crucifixion on Good Friday, were in a bad place. Not just because they faced the very real risk that they too might be arrested, tortured and killed as they were linked to him but also because of what they had done and failed to do for

him. Peter was full of guilt having denied Jesus; and all the disciples were living with the knowledge that they had deserted him at his critical hour. They experience anger that their hopes that Jesus was the one who would redeem Israel had collapsed, and immense fear about what lay ahead and what they should do. They also faced the overwhelming loneliness and grief at the loss of their beloved teacher – a grief which Mary Magdalene expresses as she weeps by Jesus' tomb.

In other words, the disciples knew all too well, what it is like to feel trapped by through their failures and by their associated feelings of fear, anger and extreme anxiety about the future. They couldn't see any way out or hope and this was certainly still the state they were in that first Easter morning.

So, what changed it for them? How did they come to realise that the resurrection of Jesus was good news for them and the whole world? In most cases, it certainly wasn't immediate but came in stages. Firstly, as they discover that Jesus' body is no longer in the tomb but even then, they cannot take in what this means. Secondly as they realise and come to trust the message of the angels which the women share with them of where they will encounter the risen Jesus.

When Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary and the other women go to Jesus' tomb on the first opportunity they can after the sabbath which follows his death, they are full of grief. They go to perform the last act of love they can show him – of anointing his body with the precious oils of burial. Finding the tomb empty, they have the extraordinary encounter with the angels who ask them the strange question. "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" and go on to tell them the momentous news that Jesus is risen from the dead.

The women relay this to the eleven apostles who do not believe them, although Peter runs to the tomb and from his response, we sense he is beginning to dare to hope. But what is critical is the angels' words, "Why do you look for the living among the dead?"

For each of the disciples as well as the women, encounter the risen Christ *outside* his tomb. In St John's account of the resurrection, Mary Magdalene first meets him in the garden outside the tomb where she mistakes him for the gardener. Jesus encounters her in the depths of her grief and despair and give her new role – to be the 'apostle to the apostles', telling them of the truth of his resurrection.

Peter, still trapped in the depths of his guilt in denying Jesus, encounters Jesus on the beach who welcomes him and commissions him to lead his church. Two disciples encounter the risen Christ on the road to Emmaus as they flee Jerusalem in fear and confusion after the crucifixion. In that glorious encounter, they are set free from their fear and despair as they grasp the good news of Christ's resurrection. Then Jesus appears to all the disciples as they gather, setting them free from their guilt and fears. He appoints them as his witnesses on earth and promising them that they will be empowered to do this as they receive the Holy Spirit.

For us too, Jesus sets us free through his resurrection. He is inviting us today to come out of the tombs of guilt, of anger, of fear, of despair in which we've trapped

ourselves through our sin and weaknesses and to encounter him in the glory of his resurrection life in the world.

One of the earliest beliefs of the Christian Church has been that on Holy Saturday, the day before Easter Day, Jesus entered the depths of hell itself and freed the souls trapped in it. It is an image portrayed in many glorious medieval paintings showing Christ leading them out of darkness into the light of a new, transformed world. It's a wonderful image for us to hold onto today, both for ourselves, and for our hurting, wounded world. We too are being invited by Christ to come out from our inner darkness into the joy of his resurrection light.

The other image which I invite you to hold onto is that of the folded grave clothes which the women saw as they visited the tomb and found it empty. They were a powerful symbol that Jesus had been set free from death. It reminds us too that when Jesus raised his friend Lazarus from the dead and Lazarus arose out of the tomb, he ordered those around him to unbind the grave clothes so he could be set free. Jesus sets us free today from those grave clothes of sin and shame in which we've enmeshed ourselves to enter a new, transformed life with him.

As we are set free by Jesus, so he invites us to bring others to freedom. As we share in his resurrection life, so he commissions us, as he did with the disciples, to seek out and help others to find the way out of the tombs in which they are trapped to a new, life-giving way of life in him. Just as Jesus transformed the hatred and evil of the world of the Cross, he asks us now to use our experience of his forgiveness and love, to bring transformation in the world and above all in the ways in which we relate to one another.

So, for example, we may use our own experience of feeling guilty and ashamed, to help others to seek Christ to seek forgiveness and renewal. We can draw on our experience of anger we've felt at the way others may have mistreated us to put ourselves in the shoes of others who may be feeling the same and seek to bring reconciliation. And as we are all too aware of our fears, doubts and anxieties, which often beset us, we can bring the hope of the risen Christ to show those who feel trapped, that things can be different and work with them to make that a reality.

This is costly because Christ calls us to witness to the power of his resurrection and its transforming grace through the way we live our lives. This means us taking the first steps to let go of past wrongs and hurts, to try as much as we can to forgive, to build bridges, and to live out what it means to put Christ first. Jesus, said, "Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies it remains single; but it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12.24). We must be willing to change, to be transformed by Christ, but if we do, in Him all things are possible.

Alleluia Christ is risen! He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

Amen

Canon Daphne Green