

Address from Nigel Guthrie for Easter Sunday, 4 April 2021

Last Easter Morning I stood at our dining room table to celebrate communion. Tina was there and did some lovely singing and our sons helped with the service too. It was a moving occasion for me, and perhaps some of you shared in it through our Facebook livestream. It wasn't Easter as we have ever known it before, but I was pleased to celebrate the feast in and for our parish.

What a lot of water has passed under the bridge since then! It's just as well we didn't know last Easter that a whole year on we would only just be emerging from a third lock down! Like many people living in Devon I feel very privileged to have avoided the worst ravages of Covid and to have received a first dose of vaccine. But we're all very aware of those who have suffered, those who have lost loved ones, and those suffering from long-covid which can be so debilitating. And we're also aware of the serious situation in many other countries including some of our closest neighbours. And in spite of being kept safe from the direct effects of Covid, many of us have felt either anxious and isolated, or indeed overworked and overstressed by the constant changes. We long to get back to a less restricted life. But we should acknowledge that returning to that life is going to be a challenge; it will be a journey for ourselves and for our church and society. Even in the midst of loosening restrictions we realise that we are not out of the woods yet and that even in recovery mode we are going to have to live with Covid as an unwelcome guest.

But for all this Easter 2021 brings a renewed sense of hope. As we celebrate the bursting of Jesus from the tomb, we see the signs of spring all around us and we can start to look forward to seeing people face to face once again. Perhaps this year the resurrection can be symbolic of the hope that never dies, the hope which we all need as we turn our minds and hearts to recovery and rebuilding?

St Mark's resurrection narrative is, like much of his gospel, brief and dramatic. Three women had come to bring spices to anoint Jesus. On their way they had been discussing who might be able to roll away the large stone so that they could gain access. But then, as they arrived, they saw the stone had already been moved and there was a young man telling them not to be afraid because Jesus had been raised. The angel commissioned them to be the first witnesses to the resurrection and to tell Peter and the disciples that Jesus was going ahead of them to Galilee. We might imagine that these first witnesses would have been filled with joy but in fact they ran away full of terror and amazement and said nothing to anyone for fear.

What is extraordinary about this so-called shorter ending to St Mark's Gospel is that it was probably the original ending of the first gospel to be written. If you look in your bibles you will find another 11 verses which complete Mark's gospel as we have it now. But most biblical scholars agree that those verses have been added by another hand. As we might expect they record appearances of the risen Jesus to his followers but their style is quite different from the rest of Mark.

The early Christian who wrote the original ending to Mark's gospel was so confident that Jesus was alive that he didn't find it necessary to present us with anything other than the unvarnished experience of the women at the tomb. I find that very telling. There was no need in his mind for elaborate arguments, or even for tidying the account up. There was no need even to describe the resurrection appearances. Like his fellow Christians the author of Mark's gospel was utterly convinced in the resurrection because he had experienced Christ with him and because his life had been transformed. We have the evidence of the four gospels to the resurrection but we also have the witness of the early church and Christians throughout the ages who have had such a strong sense of the presence of Jesus with them that they have been strengthened and sustained to live his risen life (as the collect for Easter 3 puts it).

For Christians the resurrection is never just about belief it is about the whole of life. We are challenged to live as if we have hope even when it feels distant. We are challenged to look for a world in which everyone has the opportunity for fullness of life whatever their present circumstances. We are challenged to work for the resurrection of the natural environment where it has been degraded or destroyed. God wants new life and full life for the whole of creation and by raising Jesus he has shown that nothing is impossible for the one who has made everything out of nothing.

God longs to involve us in bringing new life and hope to others and to our world. We see huge injustice and inequality around us and it gets plenty of publicity. But let's look out all the more for signs of resurrection in the world, because when we see good new things happening we know that God is at work in them. They may not have a Christian label, or a religious label of any sort. But God doesn't need labels and perhaps doesn't even see them except when they are used to put down other people.

We know that the long tail of Covid brings with it inequality, sickness and poverty. But it has also led to great new initiatives in providing housing for everyone, in

bringing communities together through Whatsapp and through a sharper awareness of the environmental challenges that face us. Yes, plenty of huge challenges, but plenty of scope for resurrection too.

The resurrection of Jesus happened at one particular time and place. But its meaning resonates every day and everywhere. We say alleluia most of all in Eastertide but we must live out that Alleluia daily here as we prepare for a resurrection life that never ends in our true home in God.