

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

If you are sitting here this morning not quite knowing what day it is, what your name is, whether you're coming or going, then you are in good company. A week ago, we began by walking around the inside of church, thanks to the inconvenient rain, in some ways we haven't stopped walking since! Our journey through Holy Week has taken us from Bethany to Jerusalem, from the upper room to the cross; it has taken us from eucharists to shared suppers and talking to new people; it has taken us from the words of scripture sung beautifully and hauntingly to the words of the Welsh priest poet R S Thomas; it has taken us through intimacy, desire and love and left us with an empty cross and a full tomb. And it has brought us here today.

Matthew's account of the resurrection is a bit of a drama queen's account. Only in Matthew do we have the earthquake at the exact moment the women arrive, the angel descending to greet them, the soldiers "becoming like dead men", and the stone rolling away as the women arrive (I also have it on very good authority that one or two of the soldiers may have been squished by the stone rolling away!). We are left in no doubt that something world changing

is happening, the women are told that Jesus has been raised from the dead and are shown where the body was. The cave that tried to hold Jesus has failed, the power of death has been broken, Jesus has been raised.

R S Thomas' poem *The Empty Church* plays with this idea in a surprising way:

They laid this stone trap
for him, enticing him with candles,
as though he would come like some huge moth
out of the darkness to beat there.
Ah, he had burned himself
before in the human flame
and escaped, leaving the reason
torn. He will not come any more

to our lure. Why, then, do I kneel still
striking my prayers on a stone
heart? Is it in hope one
of them will ignite yet and throw
on its illuminated walls the shadow

of someone greater than I can understand?¹

Well, hang on a minute, he's not talking about the tomb but the church, and isn't this poem going against what we are celebrating at Easter? Of course I'm going to say not at all!

Thomas reminds us of the events of Holy Week as he says, "he has burned himself before in the human flame and escaped". On the cross Christ submits fully to the human flame of vengeance, anger and sacrifice, but not again. He has escaped. Not that God has run away from us, but the message to the women at the tomb is the same message to us here. God cannot be contained, not in a tomb, not in a church, not in our liturgy nor even says Thomas in another poem, *A Welsh Testament*, "between the boards of a black book."²

"To set us free, [Christ] needs to free himself from the traps that humanity sets for him, not just the obvious trap of the crucifixion set by his enemies, but from the traps inadvertently laid by his friends, limits we set for ourselves about what is reasonable to expect God to demand of us, and for us to

¹ R S Thomas, *Collected Poems 1945-1990*, p.349

² *ibid*, p.117

demand of God. If we seek God after Christ's escape from this flame in resurrection, then let's be clear: we can never trap God, by any means, ever again. In resurrection God reveals his freedom from sin and death, his freedom to love and save, his freedom to be who God will be."³

The resurrection shows us that God has been freed from all constraints. That's what we see in Acts. Remember Peter, the guy who's always opening his mouth and putting his foot in it? Here he is witnessing to the freedom we have in Christ, and to who? To Gentiles, to the ones who are outside of the covenant allegedly. Peter is thinking on his feet, and getting it right at last, "I truly understand that God shows no particularity." God cannot be constrained to favourites. Somebody might want to tell the US Secretary of War that, and the agitators of so-called Christian Nationalism here.

And because God is free, we too are free to participate in this resurrection life. That's Paul's point in Colossians, Christ has been raised to the right hand of God the Father, so have we. The language here is fully baptismal even though Paul doesn't use the word. We know from his letter to the Romans

³ The Reverend Canon Dr Roland Riem, *Holy Week Reflections 2021*

that Paul sees baptism as our own dying to sin and rising to new life, our identity is changed, “identification with Christ means that [we are] caught up with the divine power that shapes the universe.”⁴ That is why we renew our baptismal vows today, we remind ourselves of the freedom we have in our resurrection life, the freedom to live lives not constrained by the systems of this world. It’s why we use phrases like, “I reject”, “I renounce”, “I repent”, each one of them sets us free to live the new resurrection life.

The problem is we like our constraints, we like the things that keep us tied up, especially the things that constrain God, because it’s less scary. Freedom can be frightening. That’s why as we go back to the Gospel, we see the women told twice not to be afraid. The angel says, “Do not be afraid.” But for some unknown reason, having witnessed an earthquake, the descent of an angel, fainting soldiers, stones rolled away and no body we are told, “they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy.” But at least they are being obedient, rushing to tell the disciples that Jesus has risen and he will meet them in Galilee. Only Jesus cannot wait so he meets them on the road, like an

⁴ Margaret Y MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians*, p.128

overexcited puppy! And he says, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”

The freedom that resurrection life brings also brings freedom from fear.

That’s why Peter says in Acts that he is preaching peace by Jesus Christ.

Somehow, through Christ’s submission to the violence and horrors of humanity he brings us peace. “The self-offering of Jesus on the cross is healing for every place, every experience, every person and every community, a peace for every injury, pain and prejudice.”⁵

The women running from the tomb in fear and great joy show us that we don’t have to have everything sorted and understood to participate in this, Jesus meets them where they are, as they are. R S Thomas picks this up in another poem *The Answer*:

There have been times
when, after long on my knees
in a cold chancel a stone has rolled
from my mind, and I have looked

⁵ *Journeying with Matthew*, p.84

in and seen the old questions lie
folded and in a place
by themselves, like the piled
graveclothes of love's risen body.”⁶

Friends, we arrive at Easter day, we arrive at the empty tomb, at the “piled graveclothes of love's risen body,” as we are, where we are. We arrive with all that surrounds us in the current global context. We arrive looking for answers and find that the tomb is empty. One of R S Thomas' more famous lines comes from his poem *Pilgrimages*, “he is such a fast God, always before us and leaving as we arrive.”⁷ But in the echoes, in the footprints he has left behind, in the scandalous rumour of a God freed from all of our constraints we see the power of God to transform and make new.

“And journeying with ‘someone greater than I can understand’ also means that we can enter into situations that we cannot understand and without solutions – crises as big as illegal and unjust wars, of huge divisions in society, of global warming - with the confidence that God is working within them – working

⁶ Thomas, *Collected poems*, p.359

⁷ *ibid*, p.364

with us, if we are open to God's wisdom, and despite us if we are not - bringing justice and peace to birth."⁸

However partial or limited our faith, however we have arrived here this morning, there is both fear and joy on offer in the resurrected Christ. The fear of the world being re-written even as we take a step into it, to that fast God leading us on to new and perhaps uncomfortable places that need us to witness to the peace and freedom in God. The joy of seeing God's transformative work in our own lives, in the situations we face, in the contexts we live in.

"He is not here ... he is going ahead of you." To those of us who call this church home, who gather here and worship here, the message of Easter Day is that we cannot constrain God here, the risen Christ has already gone ahead of us into our community and beyond. As a PCC we have been looking at those areas where we glimpse him at work already and our work in this coming year and beyond will be to follow and get involved in new life and new things. To those of us who might be visiting, the message of this Easter Day is that the

⁸ Reims

risen Christ has gone ahead of you, to wherever, whoever, whatever you go back to, whether in fear or great joy or both. The risen Christ meets us today, shows us himself, and goes ahead of us. In this new freedom we are invited to follow.

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