

Victory!

By Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Easter Sunday, 12th April 2020 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst (broadcast live-streamed from Sandhurst Rectory due to the Corona virus lock-down)

Readings: Jeremiah 31:1-6, Psalm 118:14-24, Matthew 28:1-10

Inscriptions

Yesterday I was exercising my dogs in the churchyard while thinking about my Easter sermon, and I was struck by the relevance of Easter to the rows and rows of gravestones in my view. A graveyard cannot fail to remind us of our mortality: it's as if you are surrounded by the reality of death. The writing on the gravestones speaks of how people come to terms with that reality.

If you look on recent memorials – say in the last 30 years – the predominant themes are about the person who has died, such as “beloved wife and mother”, and about the feelings of the relatives, for example: “Sadly missed, never forgotten”; or “Always in our thoughts”.

There are also lots of much older memorials in our churchyard, and you are more likely to find on them a quotation from the Bible, or a phrase that shows a convinced belief in life after death. For example, there's a memorial to a husband and wife, Thomas and Jane Hale, who died just over a hundred years ago. Under the husband's name is written

*Peace, perfect peace, with loved ones far away:
In Jesus' keeping we are safe and they.*

Under the wife's name is the simple but bold message

Jesus has vanquished death and all its powers.

What would *you* like to be put on your gravestone? And what difference does the message of Easter make to your answer?

The tomb of Jesus

I don't think that at the time of Jesus it was common to write inscriptions on Jewish tombs, beyond just the name of the person. But in the case of Jesus, the need for an inscription quickly became redundant. Before 3 whole days had passed there wasn't any body in the tomb where Jesus had been laid on Good Friday. The Jewish authorities were in consternation about the loss of the body, and Jesus' friends were claiming he'd come back from the dead.

On Friday George and I watched Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical *Jesus Christ Superstar* on Youtube. It was a most impressive production. But the most striking thing about it for us was that the story *ended* with Jesus being taken down from the Cross. The musical ends on a note of sadness, as Jesus dies alone, betrayed by a disillusioned Judas and deserted by all his friends except Mary Magdalene. Lloyd Webber's Jesus is an idealist who struggles to cope with the myriad demands of people for healing, complains to God in the Garden of Gethsemane that no one could have worked harder

for the cause, and reluctantly agrees to follow through with God's plan, even though it means his death. His humanity is all too evident, but he lacks the dignity of the biblical Jesus. The biblical Jesus is certainly filled with dread at the prospect of his suffering, but faces it bravely in the knowledge that it will bring about forgiveness for humanity, and that his death and resurrection will make the gift of eternal life open to all.

Which, do *you* think, is the authentic Jesus? Which one offers you the inspiration and the sense of hope that will help you overcome the trials and tribulations of life?

But is it for real?

A lot of people in our country today have a rather ambivalent attitude towards the idea of life after death. Most of the time we avoid thinking about death, because medical science has made it seem like an aberration from the "normal" situation in which there's a drug or an operation for nearly every known illness. But when someone dies, people seem to either assume that they've gone to heaven or think of the person being still close to them, an unseen presence watching over them. Or both. I've never asked people what is the basis for their belief, or why sure they are about it. It's not something you ask grieving relatives, especially if you don't know them well.

It's one thing to think about loved ones who have died. It's another to face the prospect of your own death. We could do with more than just a hopeful feeling that we'll survive somewhere "on the other side". The current COVID pandemic should be a wake-up call to all of us to face this issue seriously.

My mother is 87 years old. She is not someone who hides away from the prospect of death. When asked how she is, her most usual response is "I'm not dead yet". Some people are uncomfortable with this reply, but I think it's rather amusing. Mum is quite ready to die, in fact she frequently asks God why he's keeping her here. She doesn't have any worries about what will happen to her after she dies. She's quite sure she'll go to be with Jesus, and with her family members who've gone before her. And her unwavering faith in this is simply due to her long-standing relationship with God, and her conviction that what the Bible says about eternal life is true.

So how can we be so sure about eternal life? Is there more to Easter than chocolate eggs and bunnies?

A firm foundation

I would say that my own faith is based on two things: a strong rational argument about Jesus being the Son of God and having risen from the dead; and personal experience of the reality of God which validates the truth of the argument.

Let's start with the argument about Jesus. It makes no sense to me that we could still be talking about Jesus nearly 2000 years after his death if he'd just been a well-meaning idealist, like the character in *Jesus Christ Superstar*. He never wrote a book. The only reason we know what he said and did in 3 short years of his ministry is that his followers, some years after his death, wrote down his sayings and the some of the stories about what he did which they had committed to memory. And they only did that because of his resurrection. Of the 12 close disciples of Jesus, who were mainly uneducated men, one had betrayed him and another, his right-hand man, had denied

all knowledge of him when questioned. After his death they hid out of fear that they too would be arrested and killed. With the sudden arrest and execution of their leader their world had fallen apart.

And yet within a few weeks they were standing up in the streets of the very city where their leader had been horribly murdered boldly claiming that he had risen from the dead. And over the next two and a half centuries they and their followers showed themselves willing to be arrested, tortured and often cruelly put to death for this belief.

Among them was St Paul, who in 1 Corinthians chapter 15 gives the earliest written record of the appearances of the risen Jesus, written down less than 25 years after the events. Paul then goes on to use this as a basis for persuading his readers that they and their loved ones who have died will also rise to eternal life in heaven.

There's plenty more I could say about the resurrection stories in the Gospels, but time does not allow. Let me just say that the combination of similarities and discrepancies between the 4 gospel accounts is a powerful argument for their authenticity. Any court of law would be suspicious of 4 totally identical witness testimonies. A further consideration is the lack of any credible alternative explanation for the empty tomb. Plus the fact that a number of people claimed to have actually met Jesus after his death, and even touched him, starting with the women in Matthew's account which we read today.

And this brings us to the other pillar of my faith – in the 50 or so years that I have consciously been a Christian, I have found the God who Jesus talked about to be real. When I pray to him, I know he is listening. I have received answers to prayers that I hadn't even vocalised. I've sensed him guiding me and giving me words to say in all kinds of situations. Jesus' message about God knowing us intimately and loving us in spite of our weaknesses has transformed my sense of who I am. I don't have all the answers, but I have found that God always shows me enough for the situation I am facing. And I have a growing confidence that he will see me through whatever difficulties lie ahead – including facing my own death when that comes.

Facing the future

In her Easter message this year, Her Majesty the Queen says, "May the living flame of the Easter hope be a steady guide as we face the future." She can say that because she knows the risen Jesus Christ as her Saviour and Lord. For her, and for all Christians, the Easter hope is not a vague sense of optimism, or a hopeful feeling. It is an assurance based on the historical reality of Jesus' life, death and resurrection complemented by a personal knowledge of the Jesus who was victorious over death.

If you want to be able to face an uncertain future with that hope, I suggest that you need to look at the evidence of the Easter story, connect it with the evidence of God's power that you have already experienced in your life, and make a decision to trust in him for the rest of your life, and for eternity. Jesus did not promise his followers an easy ride, but he did promise us his strength in our weakness, and the guidance of his Holy Spirit.

On this Easter Sunday, why not take a step of faith towards God? Bring to him your hopes and fears for the future, including your feelings about death. Look death in the eye and say, with St Paul,

“Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting? ...

Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ! (*1 Corinthians 15:55,57 NRSV*)