**Sermon Easter 2020**

Acts 10:34-43, John 20:1-18

12th April 2020

Last Easter the world was shocked by the fire at the cathedral of *Notre Dame de Paris,* it was a horrific sight, this is, after all, a part of the shared cultural heritage of humanity. A fire in the temples of Kyoto or the Great Mosque in Mecca would also diminish that shared heritage.

Who imagined what this Easter would bring!!!

Perhaps because it happened in Holy Week I could not bot recall a fire in York Minster in July 1984. A professor of Theology, David Jenkins, had just been ordained as Bishop of Durham. To much consternation in sections of the British media after a comment he had made came to light, in which he said the resurrection “*was not just a conjuring trick with bones*.”

That he had said this in a carefully constructed lecture as an academic meant little, these few words were taken and lifted out of all context and offered both as evidence of his unfitness for office and of the sorry state of contemporary British Christianity. Papers which seemed to have not the faintest awareness of Christianity were suddenly like a latter day outbreak of the inquisition.

Every year those of us called upon to preach today and over the season of Easter can, in certain circles, be closely scrutinised. I have never felt any impediment to being bold on this day.

Joan Chittester writes that rather than spend our energy today on what “really” happened to Jesus at his resurrection we should reflect on the possibility of our own.

*The old news about Easter is that it is about resurrection. The new news may be that it is not so much about the resurrection of Jesus as it is about our own. Unfortunately, we so often miss it. Jesus, you see, is already gone from one tomb. The only question now is whether or not we are willing to abandon our own, leave the old trappings behind and live in the light of the Jesus, the Christ, whom the religious establishment persecuted and politicians condemned.*

To say the resurrection is more than a conjuring trick with bones is not in any sense to deny the physicality of resurrection, but I leave that open. The resurrection is, truth to tell, mighty confusing. Jesus appears here and there and sometimes in the very moment he is recognised he is gone. In the earliest scripture reference to the resurrection in 1 Corinthians a series of appearances are listed but no woman is mentioned as a witness at all. Early it seems there was some editing out going on. Today we heard from John and Mary Magdalene, distressed by the empty tomb, runs to Peter and another disciple and clever old Peter manages to work out what has happened

What are we to make of the diversity of resurrection accounts? Let alone their gender politics! That I think is a topic for a PhD and not for a comparatively brief reflection.

The text becomes more interesting and for me compelling when the men have been and gone and Mary is left alone.

She stands outside the tomb and looks in with a mixture of grief and puzzlement, she sees two angels there who ask her why she is crying. Well we know why,, because Jesus has not been allied to rest in peace and his body has been taken away. She turns round and sees Jesus, well no, she doesn’t really see him as she does not recognise him yet. She thinks he is the gardener and asks if he has taken the body away.

Then it happens, the dawn of recognition.

One word, Mary.

She hears her name and it all falls into place.

To hear your name is a powerful thing, especially if you are anxious, uncertain or afraid. A few years ago I was asked to go to a conference in Jakarta, I was informed a student from the theological college hosting the event would meet me. She wasn’t there when I arrived and left the cool efficiency of customs and immigration for the busyness of the Arrivals Hall. I knew she would be there – eventually – and so she was some 3 hours later. There was much relief in hearing my name.

How much more so for Mary, how utterly confusing too. After all even waiting at an airport in a huge city in the developing world you are picked up eventually, no one, no one expects the dead to walk out of their tombs.

But one word, Mary, was compelling enough to break and remake her world.

And whatever the arguments about resurrection , the tests of orthodoxy, the doctrinal squabbles Christians get themselves in to I want us to reflect on this, that resurrection is not something out there or waiting for us after our deaths. It begins here and now .

It begins with being called by name out of our fear, out of the tombs we find ourselves in to a deeper and fuller life.

And in his rising Jesus does what he did in his ministry, for there he was offering that deeper and fuller life.

Look at the stories of Jesus’ life. All the way through you can see that death is losing its grip. Every time somebody once crippled stands and walks, or blind eyes begin to see, or prisoners of fear break free, or the outcast dance in the temple, death is being pushed onto the back foot, and fullness of life is having its way over deathliness and despair. Every time Jesus is confronted with the finger prints of death, life breaks through. By the time we get to Easter, how could the tomb be anything but empty?  
  
This is what resurrection faith is all about. It’s got nothing to do with theories and doctrines and speculations about the nature of Jesus’s post-Easter body. It is a radical trust in the God who keeps coming back when everything seems lost. A willingness in the face of overwhelming odds, of oppressive power-mongering and the might of dollar and dictator, to entrust ourselves to the ways of life and love. To sing and dance and celebrate in the face of those who would stifle joy and measure out existence by the spoonful. It is to take the hand of the one who calls us by name and dance.

Life is bigger than our doubts. Bigger than our accommodation to the ways of the lifeless. Bigger than any army or dictator or power monger who would stand over you and wrest your life from you hands. Even if they kill the body, they have no power to stop the one who keeps coming back and resurrecting us body and all back to life and life to the full.   
  
Easter Sunday is not an isolated event. It is unique in its climactic nature, but we had glimpses of it over and over again throughout Scripture as God repeatedly responded to people faced with the power of death and led them forward to freedom and fullness of life. Easter is everywhere, wherever the Spirit of God comes back in the hearts of downtrodden people and they begin the dance of life, with futures resurrected as they follow the resurrected Lord of life and become part of God’s great movement of raising life from the midst of death when all hope seems gone.

This Easter may hope, life, possibility speak to us and name us, inviting us into our resurrection

Amen