

2026 TALK, 29.3.26, MATTHEW 28, EASTER SUNDAY

ALL HAIL – LET THERE BE JOY!

The Easter story in Matthew's gospel. Now I have to confess, I would not usually preach from Matthew on Easter Sunday. I much prefer to preach from Luke or John's gospel, on this hi point of the Christian year... I'll explain later.

But here's what I always find wonderful about **all** these accounts of the first Easter. The disciples are always playing 'catch-up'. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the Easter garden. Like the first disciples we have a lot to learn. We are always playing 'catch-up'. I'm reminded of one of my enduring memories from childhood. Whenever we are out for a walk with my Mum, I always ended up running to catch up. Being tall, mum always walked quite quickly, so I always felt like I was out of breath... Always lagging a few steps behind. Similarly, how slow we are to believe... Jesus is ahead and we always take our time to catch up with what the Father, Jesus & the Holy Spirit are doing, often before our eyes...

That morning, the two Marys came to the tomb with heavy hearts, dragging their feet. In Matthew's account, there is no mention of spices to anoint the body of Jesus. They have just come to look... Like the rest of the disciples, they had no sense of anticipation, despite all that Jesus had said. In fact, here's just one delicious irony for you: Jesus' enemies seem to have paid more attention to his promise that he would be raised from the dead. Which is why they sealed Jesus' tomb & put a guard on duty outside. So much for human plans...

God surprises everyone & turns the tables. So, Jesus' body is raised to new life & bursts out of the tomb. Meanwhile the guards on duty become like 'dead men'. They are shaken, like the earth at their feet. God is shaking the nations, God is shaking up the old order & making all things new. Guards suddenly have no purpose; they have nothing left to guard. Big, beefy soldiers are reduced to quivering wrecks. And two fearful women in a state of utter despair are suddenly energised & go running from the scene. They start to run, with a growing hope in their hearts & some wonderful news to share.

No sooner have they left the scene than the forces that tried to keep Jesus contained are beginning to spread another story. 'Fake news' of how the disciples obviously came & stole the body... Another conspiracy story. Another attempt to quash the truth. But the truth will out...! Amen?

It's amusing the way this scene is described in Matthew. Don't you think? I think this is deliberate. The Easter story is a joke – with the empty tomb as the punchline. God has the last laugh. And I think Matthew can't avoid some humour here. I can almost imagine him laughing as he writes these words... So matter-of-fact. So under-stated. After the earthquake, an after-shock from the Good Friday earthquake, which shook up Jerusalem & the Temple, an angel in lightning apparel appears. Get this. The angel simply rolls back the stone across the entrance to the tomb and then he **sits on it** no less... And from there he speaks to the two women. His words could almost be translated like this: 'Don't panic you two. You looking for Jesus, by any chance? The One who was crucified... Yeah, I know. Well, sorry to **disappoint you**, but He's not here... Remember what he told you? He's risen, just like he said.' Then the angel invites the women to see 4 themselves where the body of Jesus had been laid...

Almost without taking a breath, the angel then moves on to what the women must do. Everything happens so fast here. Lots of catching up to do... The angel doesn't want them lingering unnecessarily at the tomb. Much more important things for them to do: to go tell others of this earth-shattering news.

Then, just as they are leaving the scene, Jesus appears out of the blue. Unlike the story of Mary in John's gospel, there is no build up to this. Jesus appearance is very sudden. Of course, that's exactly as it would have been for those women on that first Easter day. But I confess, I miss the up close, personal account of Mary's experience which we have in John. And here is another thing I have always struggled with, from Matthew's account: Jesus' opening line: 'Greetings!'. Almost like Jesus saying 'Hi', or 'Howdee' for an American audience, or perhaps 'G'day' for an Aussie audience. It's such an ordinary, everyday greeting... But I guess that's the point isn't it? Like Jesus is saying: 'business as usual; no big deal; I said this would happen, and here I am'

So, here Matthew delights in making the extraordinary, seem almost ordinary... That's funny. Isn't it? I think it's meant to make us laugh – at God's extraordinary ability to do the unexpected... & our inability to believe God... But there was part of me that felt this wasn't the whole story. So, I did a bit of a word study on the Greek word for greetings: 'Kairete'.. Which suddenly opened up a whole world of meaning. It gives some further insight into the Easter story.

Yes, 'Kairete' is a word people would use as the opening for any letter. It was used by people every day to simply say 'good morning!'... But on Easter Sunday this one word is suddenly loaded with huge, extra significance. It can be translated using the old word 'Hail!'... And it always has a heavy note of joy, like saying: 'rejoice - for this is a new day!'... It is a word addressed to others, but always with an acknowledgement of God's presence. It could be seen as a very short-hand way of summarising that well-known chorus: (SING): 'This is the day, this is the day that the LORD has made, that the LORD has made... We will rejoice, we will rejoice & be glad in it & be glad in it...'. Alleluia! In other words, this one word 'Kairete! / greetings' has an awful lot to say!

I don't think it is stretching things to see an echo here of Jacob's opening words to his twin brother. These 2 were previously dead to each other. But after Jacob wrestles for a night, in fear for his life, with a heavenly messenger, he is able to greet Esau with these words: ***'Seeing you today is like seeing the face of God'***.

Let me now tell you a story of someone else who saw the face of God & lived. This is a story I have lifted from the pages of this Easter Good News newspaper we gave out to everyone this morning. There are stories in here from all around the world, about all kinds of people. Celebrities, TV presenters, footballers, academics, but also ordinary people. It's the story of a Serbian doctor I want to share with you this morning. Dr Radoslav Sreckovic...

Radoslav came to the UK & earned himself a pile of money working as a sports doctor. He returned to Serbia to set up his own pharmacy business, but he lost all the money he invested through some corruption scandal. Around the same time, he discovered he had prostate & bladder cancer. Expecting to die very soon, he went to live a simple life in an abandoned house on a remote mountain, near Novi Sad, not that far from Belgrade... (Novi Sad means 'new garden'... now there's another link to the good news of Easter...).

Radoslav needed food, so he ended up at a church homeless project, which he visited regularly, until he became too poorly. People at the church noticed Radoslav's absence, so they went to look for him. Finding him in a very bad way, they decided to pay for a flat for him in the city. In their words, this flat was somewhere they could: 'bring him food & take care of him & where he could die with dignity'. The Pastor of the church, Pastor Beredi commented: 'We did pray for healing, but I must say we did not expect a miracle'... Sound

familiar?... Well, hear this: Last year Radoslav was baptised, probably in the River Danube, & gave testimony that he had been completely healed of cancer... Alleluia ! At his baptism, Radoslav said: 'Medicine was my god & medical textbooks were my Bible. But I met the only One who is most powerful.'... Alleluia !

God indeed had the last laugh in Radoslav's life. (I recommend you read Radoslav's story in full over Easter, as well as the other good news stories here).

So here's a question for you. What is a tomb once it is empty? It's just a cave, an empty hole. It is completely superfluous... No longer a tomb. No longer needed... A bit like this church building without any people... **We** are the church of the risen Jesus, not this building. And **we** have some glorious good news to share - with a dying & desperate world. Don't we?...

So, to finish, we have three applications this Easter Sunday, based on this story of the empty tomb, and on what happened next.

First, in their joy at seeing Jesus again, the women clasped the feet of Jesus & worshipped. They greeted this glorious, new day... Today, God in Christ is making all things new. Including us... He wants to give us new hearts to worship. It is here, around this table that we can reach out & touch the nail-scarred feet of Jesus. Here we get to worship the living One, who was dead & now is alive forever & ever. Alleluia !

Second, the disciples were instructed to go to a mountain in Galilee. To retrace their steps & to remember. There are no details of which particular mountain. Perhaps this was the mountain where Jesus originally called the disciples, perhaps where he taught the Sermon on the Mount, perhaps the Mount of Transfiguration. For all we know, this might have been one & the same mountain. But this place was a memorable touch-stone for them all. We are called to seek our own face-to-face meeting with the risen Jesus. To keep seeking Jesus & following in His way...

Third, the risen Jesus concludes this gospel with these memorable words: 'All authority in heaven & on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, the Son & the Holy Spirit... & surely I am with you to the very end of the age'... Everything we will ever encounter in this world is under the authority of Jesus. All of life &

death, is in God's hands. As Paul writes: 'Nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God, in Christ Jesus'. This bread & wine tells us this is true.

As we gather around the LORD's table now, we give thanks for the good news of Easter. As the 2 women knew, this was not something they could keep to themselves. Let's pray that we too, with hope-filled hearts, will share this good news with others in our town & far beyond ... Amen ?