

Easter 2 sermon preached by Andrew 28 April 2019 – How blessed are those...

Acts 5: 27-32; John 20: 19-31

How blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.

I take some comfort from these words because they remind me that faith for most of us isn't some blinding flash on the Damascus Road, but rather a lifelong pilgrimage in which certainty will often elude us and even God himself may seem absent. The lights in heaven may be on, but sometimes it seems like there's no-one home, no-one there. And yet, and yet, often by a kind of three steps forward, one step back kind of process we come to believe. As one old priest told me many years ago: "As I get older I believe more and more about less and less." So a lot of stuff maybe isn't worth sweating over, but one thing out of our whole Christian story matters immeasurably and that is the Resurrection. Thomas, standing in for us here brings all our questions and all our doubts. Like Eliza Doolittle who sang: don't talk of stars shining above, if you're in love – show me! So "show me" says Thomas. A bit like an earlier occasion when Jesus says: You know the way to the place where I am going, and Thomas pipes up: Lord, we do not know where you are going so how can we know the way? Which provides Jesus with the opportunity to say: I am the Way, the Truth and the Life.

So this is a dialogue that matters. Because as St Paul says: If Christ be not raised then we are of all people most to be pitied.

But Paul knows better and what he knows is that Resurrection, like coming to faith is not just a one-off event. It is a one-off event in so far as our Christian story absolutely pivots on it. Christ's cry of abandonment on the Cross – my God, my God, why? Becomes the Church's shout of triumph on Easter Day: He is risen! Alleluia!

But you have to get beneath the surface of that kind of doctrinal statement for it to have any meaning at all. This isn't just Thomas having a Victor Meldrew moment: I don't believe it! It's all of us asking, what can this possibly mean, if it means anything.

And what it means is this: The prodigal son can go home, because his father is waiting at the gate already looking for him every day until he comes to himself and goes back to where he's loved. A friend of mine says that if the only story in the New Testament we had was the story of the prodigal son it would be enough, because the whole Gospel is in it. The fallen son – that's you or me – can be raised up, and raised up again and again.

It means that when your relationship breaks down you can begin again, because God's desire is to raise you up out of every failure and heal you of every wound. It means that you don't despair over your kids when things go wrong for them or they mess up, because you have a resurrection mentality, a resurrection way of seeing the world and people that

tells you that it's not over – and you share that hope with them as you wipe away their tears and put them on their feet again.

It means that when a right wing extremist bombs mosques in New Zealand, the dignity and compassion of a young prime minister can lift a nation. Death need not and can't be allowed to have the last word and Prince William's words of comfort and affirmation and sympathy again helped to raise people up this week. It means that when churches and hotels were bombed in Sri Lanka on Easter Day itself, the Church there through its desperate tears still says offers prayers and as our old liturgies say "weeping o'er the grave we make our song: Alleluia!"

It means that after the most dismal period in our political life that any of us can remember, a young Swedish girl can get politicians talking seriously about climate change, shamed into action – and a little child shall lead them, as the Bible says. And the death of a young journalist in Northern Ireland, a campaigner for human rights for everyone, can again bring our politicians together to hear a priest challenge them in her name not to let her death be for nothing, that out of that terrible violent loss something should be raised up.

All of this and more is resurrection. It is not just an event two thousand years ago. It is not just an article of faith. It is a way of seeing. It is, quite frankly, what gets me out of bed in the morning. This is the day that the Lord has made – we will rejoice and be glad in it! God's mercies are? New every morning, so great is his faithfulness. I literally say those words to myself before I get up, because I know I need the resurrection power of God to make anything out of me and anything out of my day.

And Paul knew this so well. He had this deep sense of being "in Christ", by which he means the risen Christ. He talks about life and death at work in his own flesh daily and he chooses consciously, deliberately to open his heart to the spirit of the Risen Jesus to transform and empower him.

That's the power we see in Peter, who roughly five minutes ago was denying he knew Jesus at all and now stands in front of the High Priest himself and he isn't afraid. How could that be, other than by a transforming encounter with the living Jesus.

There are really only two essential doctrines in Christianity. Remember my old priest who believed more and more about less and less? One is the Incarnation – the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, God so loved the world... and the other is the Resurrection. Jesus is raised up as the first of many brothers and sisters, he has opened the way beyond death. And even our little deaths don't get to have the last word, those daily disappointments and failures and setbacks. None of these get the last word, neither do our sins. God made flesh, Jesus crucified and raised up – could he make it any clearer? He ain't letting go of you and me. No matter what, there's only one ending he's prepared to accept. His will for us is resurrection today and tomorrow and next Tuesday and every other day and into eternity. We just need to get with God's programme, with his

resurrection way of seeing. How blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have come to believe.