

Sunday 8th April 2012 Cathedral, Grahamstown 9.30 a.m.		Easter Day – Year B Renewal of Baptismal Vows
Isaiah 25:6-9	Ps 118:1-2, 14-24	Acts 10:34-43
		Mark 16:1-8
The Resurrection of Christ		

“Go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” (Mark 16:7)

It is wonderful to worship together here on Easter Day, as Christians all over the world are doing. We proclaim and celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and his victory over sin and evil and death. All the powers of darkness, all the forces of evil, all the weight of sin, death itself, could not keep him in the grave. We share in his risen life and in the power of his victory. Our liturgy puts it well: “By his death he has destroyed death, and by his rising again he has restored to us eternal life.”¹

Easter also means that the Lenten fast is over! I am sure that there will be much feasting and celebration, with Easter eggs and chocolate and all the good things that people chose to put aside, during Lent.

The women go to the tomb

Something wonderful happened on that first Easter Day.

After Jesus had died, his body had been taken down from the cross, wrapped in a linen cloth, and then placed in a tomb dug out of the rock – a cave, rather than a hole in the ground. A large stone had been rolled against the door of the tomb to close it.

The Sabbath was now over. Early that morning, the three women who had been at the crucifixion, and who had seen where the body of Jesus

¹ *An Anglican Prayer Book 1989*, 136, # 12

had been laid, went to buy the necessary spices, used - as was the custom - to disguise the smell of decaying bodies. They were not expecting anything unusual at the tomb – certainly not the stone rolled away, the body gone and words of resurrection.

Like those three women on Good Friday, there are times when you and I come face to face with death. It may literally be the death of a loved one. It may be an experience of extreme suffering and horror. It may be a great disappointment. It may be the death of a dream. It may be a goodbye as our children leave home and town for greener pastures. It may be that the tomb we visit is when we see the ruins of something we have built, a project we have poured our life into – and now it has been neglected or destroyed. Like those three women, we don't expect a resurrection, we don't expect that things could possibly turn around.

The young man

But then the story changes. The women discover that the large stone closing up the entrance to the tomb, has been rolled away. The place where the body of Jesus had been laid is empty. And inside the tomb, instead of the body of Jesus, is a young man, who speaks to them with words of quite remarkable hope and promise.

It is not clear who the young man was. Was he the unnamed young man who had been following Jesus at his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:51)? Was he an angel, as we find in the other Gospel accounts of the resurrection? Whoever he was, his message is the key to the entire Gospel. “Jesus has been raised. He is not here.” (Mk 16:6).

The tragic events of Good Friday had ended with the Lord's cry from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34) On Easter Day, that tragedy is turned upside down. Death and defeat and evil and darkness and despair and failure, powerful as they are, do not have the last word.

We begin to see this as the young man continues to speak. “Go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” (Mark 16:7) The disciples who had run away and deserted Jesus, and Peter who had denied him, are to take heart and follow him to Galilee. Their failure is not the end of God’s plan and purpose for them. There is this wonderful promise of forgiveness and a fresh start. And failure and despair and tragedy and sorrow are not the end of your and my story, either.

They flee in terror

The women hear the words, see the empty tomb – and run away terrified, amazed, frightened. The gospel ends very abruptly on this note (the shorter ending to Mark’s Gospel) and there are all sorts of debates as to why this is: was the manuscript damaged, torn off, as can happen? Did Mark the writer mean to leave the story hanging in mid-air? The other gospels round things off far more neatly: Jesus appears to the disciples, they are all strengthened in their faith, they are sent out with the message of good news.

But this abrupt ending is more like real life. Life is messy; things are not always neatly wrapped up with wonderful happy endings. Instead, we are given a glimpse of the truth, of another picture; we are left confused, frightened – but with the glimmer of hope. We are told that Jesus will go ahead of us to Galilee, and we will see him there: in the future, as events unfold. There is no quick fix or easy answer to the struggles and heartaches and deaths that we face. Instead, there is the expectancy and hope that the Risen Christ will appear to us. He is going ahead of us; there we will see him.

And it does happen. The Risen Christ does come to us. I was profoundly moved by the testimony of those who spoke here in the Cathedral, two weeks ago, at the Breaking the Silence, the annual Rhodes University protest against rape and abuse. There were many tears, but there was also immense courage and love and support – and

perhaps healing as people spoke of what had happened to them. The experience of evil and sin and violence did not destroy those women, did not have the last word. Light overcame the darkness. And as those wonderful young people shared their testimonies, with all the heartache and anguish and pain and anger, it was not the power of evil that was present or that had the upper hand: it was the love and power of good. Death and resurrection. The Risen Christ was amongst us.

We face the harsh reality of death at the deathbed or graveside of someone we love. The resurrection of Christ says that death is not the end. It is the end of this life as we know it. But it is also the beginning – the beginning of life with God beyond the grave.

We face the reality of sin and evil and death in the on-going crisis in public school education here in the Eastern Cape; or when we find school children in the grip of drugs, or young boys dabbling with the power of the amakhosi, or young girls being sold off as sex slaves.

And we see the power of the resurrection when a teacher faithfully gives of her best to the children in her care; when a young boy renounces the power of evil over his life and turns to Christ; when someone is finally able to die in peace and in the sure and certain hope of eternal life with Christ.

We see the power of the resurrection when new leaders emerge out of the ashes and death of the past, and serve and lead with integrity and faithfulness.

Fr Michael Lapsley: “Easter makes a victor of the victim. The Easter challenge is for victims not to become victimisers.”

At Easter, as we renew our baptismal vows, we die to sin and rise again with Christ. And as people of the resurrection, we do not give up hope, we do not allow death to have the last word. Instead, we continue in faith and trust, knowing and believing that the power of

death and evil and sin has been broken, and that good will triumph and win the day in the end. May it be so for you and me, for us all.

CONCLUSION

This is a time to say “Yes” once again to God in Christ. Let us say “Yes” to the Lordship of Christ. Let us put our faith and trust in God. Let us choose Jesus as our Lord.

We come now to renew the promises made at our baptism.