

“DESPAIR TO HOPE”

John 20:1-9

Easter Day begins with despair. The despair of the walk to the tomb in the thinning darkness. The despair of the disciples, friends and followers of Jesus who have had all hope sucked out of them by the events of the last couple of days. As we've said so often, we are so familiar with this story, we know the ending, so we can't really enter into the whirlpool of emotions that they were all experiencing – but let's at least try for a few moments.

It all started on Thursday night – a night of heavy sadness as Jesus shared the Passover meal with his closest friends and set in train a series of events that would change their lives forever. It was a night of betrayal, denial and desertion. Jesus was arrested as he prayed out in the garden. And it wasn't the arrest that gave rise to the despair, but the fact that he was unwilling – or unable – to do anything about it. There was a sense of helplessness and frustration about it all.

And that continued on Friday as they watched him being tried by the spineless Pilate and self-serving King Herod, as he was beaten and humiliated in front of the huge crowds in Jerusalem for the Passover Festival, as he was nailed to the rough wooden cross by the soldiers of a foreign power to die slowly and agonisingly in the searingly hot Mediterranean sun, and as he was finally (so they thought) laid to rest in a sympathiser's tomb.

Then came Saturday, the darkest day of all. For those close to Jesus it was all over. They'd seen him die. They'd helped to bury him. And as the full force of what had happened hit them, they had time to reflect on it all. All seemed lost. All hope was drained from them. They had trusted Jesus, found hope in his words. They had laughed with him and cried with him, rejoiced at healings and celebrated miracles. They had even begun to grasp something of his message of the Kingdom of God and the transformation that could take place in people's lives and communities. They had invested their whole lives in what he was offering them, so profound was their trust. They'd given up their time. Some had given up their jobs – simply standing up and walking out as soon as this unknown rabbi invited them to join him. The women who travelled with him had invested their money, supporting his mission with their material goods. It was such an attractive project, such a wonderful opportunity. They had had such hope – hope for themselves, hope for their nation, hope for the world. And now that hope was gone, transformed – as Jesus was always transforming things – but transformed into despair. So Easter Sunday began with that resigned walk to the grave, to take care of his earthly remains and to say a proper goodbye to him – and to all their dreams.

There was no longer any hope – only a deep sense of despair. Those of you who like looking at words will probably know that “despair” is actually the opposite of “hope”. It doesn't quite come across in English, with all the borrowings and so on in our language, so forgive me if I show you what I mean from French. (Don't worry – it's not complicated, and there won't be a test.) The French word for hope is “espoir”. The French word for despair is “désespoir” – “espoir” with a negative prefix on the front. Literally, I suppose, that means “unhope”. Despair is really “unhope”, an absence of hope.

And that is the experience of so many people, isn't it? Many people – maybe many of us here this morning – live lives that are full of unhope. There's no optimism, nothing to look forward to, no future expectation other than that things will just grind on as they are now. For some of you that's the short-term future – the threat of redundancy, the worrying medical prognosis, the looming financial disaster. For many of us it's in the long-term – What's the point? Where's life going? What's going to happen at the end of it? The most unhopeful occasions I've ever experienced have been the two or three humanist funerals I've attended – thanks for a life lived in the here and now, but no hope of anything else, nothing further to look forward to, no prospect of life continuing. In other words, it's been a fairly futile existence, really.

And once you have taken away the hope of anything beyond the here and now, there's nothing left but a kind of existentialist despair, a nihilism that sucks the vitality from our present existence because of the lack of anything that has any real value. Just as the disciples of Jesus had invested their lives and their hopes in a man who now lay dead and cold on a the stone shelf of a borrowed tomb, so we invest our lives and hopes in things which will sooner or later betray those hopes and, at best, turn our dreams into wispy illusion and at worst into living nightmares. We have seen how the economy has proved to be full of unhope. Our jobs, our health, our retirement plans, even our friends and families can prove to be sources of disillusion and despair. We might like to think there's some hope in them, but harsh experience eventually tells us that there is none. We'd like to think there's something worth pinning our hopes on, but at the moment, like the corpse of a failed Messiah, there's no hope of their delivering the goods. Listen to these lines from Thomas Hardy – a gloomy old bearer of unhope if ever there was one. This is the last stanza from his poem *The Darkling Thrush*:

*So little cause for carollings
Of such ecstatic sound
Was written on terrestrial things
Afar or nigh around,
That I could think there trembled through
His happy good-night air
Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew
And I was unaware.*

We say, with the cynical Wessex novelist and poet, there must be some hope somewhere, but I'll be blowed if I can see it. We might even think that we see glimpses of it from time to time in other people, but we come to God, like those first despairing disciples and say, wherever this blessed Hope is, I can't seem to find it.

And then ... And then, resurrection! These unhopeful disciples and friends of Jesus approach the tomb where their hopes lie dead and buried and they see the stone has been moved. They find the grave empty. There are angels and voices and words of life rather than of death. Some of them actually see Jesus and hear him. Jesus *is* alive! Jesus *has* been true to his word. Their longings have come true. Jesus was alive and able to inspire them with a renewed hope, a hope that could now overcome all things. Unhope was gone. Despair was banished. Hope – real hope, certain hope, resurrection hope – had arrived. And, as Alexander Pope put it so memorably, “*hope springs eternal in the human breast.*” Here was a hope that would outlive human life itself.

And this hope was such a powerful hope – this hope of resurrection, of living again as Christ lived, of following their Lord and Messiah through death and out the other side – that from then on it influenced all they did. Read through *The Acts of the Apostles*. Read through the letters of Paul and John and Peter and James, through *The Letter to the Hebrews* and on into *John's Revelation*. They are words that are drenched in hope. Peter's preaching, Paul's preaching – their lives of joy and integrity, their writing and thinking. After the Gospels, after the amazing fact of the resurrection every single book in the New Testament (with the exception of *2 Peter* and *Jude*) has something to say about the Christian hope of resurrection. This hope was a hope which transformed all those who grabbed hold of it.

It was a hope which brought new possibilities. Jesus' death wasn't, after all, the end. It wasn't the death of all their dreams but the prologue to an even greater vision of an eternal future in God's renewed creation. This was a new beginning, making possible a new way of looking at the world, a new way of living, a new set of attitudes that are no longer bounded by the limits of human thought. Now they don't have the unhope of a dead human Messianic pretender, but the hope that is grounded for ever in a living God. This is Paul, writing to Timothy: “*This is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance ... that we have put our hope in the living God, who is the saviour of all men, and especially of those who believe*” (*1 Timothy 4:9,10*) Trustworthy? Why? Because Jesus has been raised from the dead. We can now know the God of hope, who can fill us with hope – “*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and*

peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (Romans 15:13). The God of life and resurrection is the perfect (in every sense) antidote to the unhope of the world around us.

But it’s not just a hope for today, for Easter Sunday, when we celebrate and briefly give expression to our faith. It’s not just a hope for the next week as we go back to work, to school, to the doctor. It’s not just a hope for the rest of our earthly lives as we grapple with creaking relationships, aging bodies, family crises, life-changing decisions. It’s a hope for all eternity, a hope that goes beyond death, a hope that follows where Jesus has blazed that resurrection trail, a hope authenticated by the mind-blowing events of Easter Sunday. As Paul writes in *1 Corinthians 15:17-19*, “*If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile, you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men.*”. This is a hope that takes us through death and gives us life for all eternity in God’s renewed creation. How good is that?!

And, as we’ve said, if you read through the New Testament you will sense that hope oozing from every page. In *Acts 26:6* Paul tells King Agrippa that this is what’s at the very heart of his faith – “*It is because of my hope in what God has promised our fathers that I am on trial today.*” The writer of *The Letter to the Hebrews* calls it “*an anchor for the soul, firm and secure*” (*Hebrews 6:19*). Peter says that God has given us “*new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade*” (*1 Peter 1:3,4*). It’s a living hope – not a dead unhope, a mortifying, stultifying despair – because of the resurrection which transforms us and transforms our view of what is possible and what is impossible. Now everything is possible and, with God, nothing is impossible. As someone once said, rather sneeringly, “If you believe in the resurrection, you’ll believe anything.” But it’s true, thank God!

Now, that should give us all a reason for real boldness. Paul writes to the Corinthian Christians, “*Therefore, since we have such a hope, we are very bold*” (*2 Corinthians 3:12*). This resurrection hope has been authenticated by Jesus, it is his way of saying “I told you so”. So if you find yourself struggling with unhope, with the despair of a life without Jesus, then this can perhaps give you the boldness to believe, to reach out and grab hold of what Jesus is offering you. After all, nothing else seems to be working, does it? The great 19th century English poet and priest Gerard Manley Hopkins, in his epic poem *The Wreck of the Deutschland*, cries out in the final stanza, “*Let him easter in us.*” Let Jesus come alive in your life, in your soul this morning. May Easter Sunday 2011 be the day that you always remember when your unhope, your despair was turned into real hope through the realisation of what the resurrection of Jesus really means.

And if you’re someone who has been a Christian for some time, then this same hope can give you boldness not only in your approach to life but in your attempts to witness for Christ. Who can harm you? Who can spoil that eternal inheritance that you are so ardently hoping for? “*I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord*” (*Romans 8:38,39*). In his resurrection Jesus has defeated even death.

So, as you celebrate today, as you try to see through the mountains of chocolate eggs and fluffy bunnies and tacky cards something of the glorious truth of the resurrection of Jesus, I pray that you will be able to look to the future – the short-term and the long-term, the temporal and the eternal – with real hope. Why? Because Jesus is alive – hallelujah! And we are alive with him – “*we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus*” (*12 Corinthians 6:14*). Oh yes, we’ll die. This earthly life will one day run out for all of us – but, as Jesus says, all those who believe in him, who have their hope based on his death and resurrection, “*will live, even though they die*” (*John 11:25*). Our life will be renewed for eternity with him. If you don’t grasp that, then, quite frankly, there’s no hope for you.