

**“THE EASTER EFFECT”**

*Matthew 28:1-10*

Well, Easter this year has been pushed into the limelight a bit more than usual by the not unwelcome publicity surrounding the decision of the National Trust and confectioner Cadburys to drop the word “Easter” from its advertisements about an egg hunt at many of the Trust’s properties. Led by the fearless Archbishop of York and vicar’s daughter Theresa May, good Christians around the land have taken the foodstuffs multi-national and the custodians of so many of our national treasures to task for omitting the name of a pagan goddess from their publicity and failing to make explicit the otherwise self-evident link between Christian faith and excessive chocolate consumption. The very people who complain so loudly about the increasing commercialisation of Christmas have felt quite put out, it seems, that Easter is not treated in the same way.

For those of you who may still be in two minds about this, let’s remind ourselves that Easter – we might as well stick with that name for the sake of convenience – is not about chocolate or games, but about resurrection. What we are celebrating here today is something unique in the history of the world, something that resonates with the past, that offers a glimpse of the eternal future, that throbs with new life and new possibilities and new beginnings here and now. We are celebrating the defeat of humanity’s oldest enemy, death. This weekend we are rejoicing together in the triumph of good over the forces of evil. Easter is all about the day when history changed direction and God started to put things back on track to where he wanted them all along.

Now, if we take a minute to think about it, most of us here today would sign up to all that. After all, we’re good Christians; we believe in all the stuff of the creeds and in all the theology of it. Yes, resurrection is at the heart of it. Yes, Jesus did leave the tomb – a living being after his widely attested death. Yes, we’ll go along with the orthodox take on what Easter stands for. And we will rationalise the mythology that has grown up around it by drawing all the usual links between spring and bunnies and eggs and new life – and, naturally, we’ll make sure it’s a proper celebration with food and drink and, of course, chocolate. But aside from the consumption of celebratory food and a couple of days off work, what does it actually mean to us? What is it all about? What difference does it really make? What is the “Easter effect”?

Well, let me suggest three things that Easter should mean for us, three ways in which it should have an effect. The resurrection of Jesus is most definitely not simply a nice story, albeit a true and historically verifiable one (but we’re not going down that road this morning). It’s not simply another bit of the stuff you have to sign up to in order to be able to call yourself a Christian – though a resurrection-less Christianity is a complete contradiction in terms. The resurrection of Jesus is something that has an effect

on our lives here and now, and helps us look forward into the eternal future. But let's begin our exploration of the "Easter effect" by considering the past.

## 1. FAITH

The resurrection is about faith. Not, in this instance, that you need to have faith that the resurrection happened; but rather that the resurrection is actually an aid to faith. You see, the resurrection is a sign that God has kept his word. What God promised in Jesus has come about. If you were here when we were looking through Matthew's Gospel a little while ago you may recall the extent to which the prophecies of the Hebrew Scriptures – our Old Testament – were fulfilled in Jesus. The Messiah whose advent had been predicted so often by the Hebrew preachers and prophets and poets was given human form in Jesus as he arrived in our world. God kept his word in setting Jesus amongst us.

And as Jesus taught and preached and debated and discussed during the three years of his ministry, so he promised time and time again that he would die and then be brought back to life. Very often that was said rather cryptically, as when he said he would destroy the Temple and rebuild it within three days, or when he claimed to be the Resurrection and the Life outside the tomb of Lazarus, or talked about the "*sign of Jonah*". Sometimes he was so blatantly obvious about it that it seemed unbelievable, as in *Mark 8:31*:

*"He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again."*

But then, of course, it happened. Jesus was brought back to life. After three days he was walking and talking and eating and praying and laughing and crying with the rest of them. It was true! He'd kept his word. God had kept his word. And the fact that it's happened – it's done and dusted – means we can now have real faith in what God tells us. He's kept his word on that – that frankly astonishing prediction has been proved to be right – so surely now we can trust him for anything. The effect of Easter is to give us grounds for faith.

## 2. HOPE

But we said earlier that there was a future dimension to this too. It's actually to do with the eternal future. If we can believe what God tells us – if it has been validated by the resurrection – then we can hold on to what he tells us about what is still to come. We can have hope for the future. Death is not to be the end. We're not just plodding through this vale of tears – or frolicking joyfully through the garden of earthly

delights (depending on your mood this morning) – and then destined for an eternity of punishment or for utter annihilation. There is a strong and certain hope of an eternity spent in the presence of Jesus in his Father’s restored Kingdom, enjoying all that God originally wanted for us.

Evil has not won the day. Death is not the end. God’s Kingdom – his benevolent, sovereign rule – is coming. We haven’t got time to look at it this morning, but that’s what *1 Corinthians 15* is all about. (Look at it when you get home.) It’s about hope – that New Testament hope that is not vague and airy-fairy, but sure and certain: we know it’s going to happen. Of course, there will be stuff to go through. There will be downs as well as ups while we live out our years in this broken world, where rubbish happens and things don’t always go the way we want. Jesus had to experience the vulnerability of humanity and the desolation of crucifixion before his resurrection and glorification, and that applies equally to us. But there’s something very, very special to look forward to, folks. This what Peter wrote, the Peter who let Jesus down so badly and who went on to know the pain and vulnerability of persecution for the cause of Christ:

*“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Peter 1:3)*

And Paul puts it like this in *Colossians 1:27*:

*“God has chosen to make known ... the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.”*

### **3. TRANSFORMATION**

That’s the past giving rise to faith and the future which is filled with hope. That can still all seem a bit theoretical, remote even. What about now? What’s the Easter effect today? There’s joy, of course, as there always is when we celebrate. And joy is not to be sniffed at – never pass up the opportunity for a bit of a celebration. But what really makes the difference for us about Easter is transformation. That happens now! As we’ve just seen, we have a transformed view of the eternal future – a sure and certain hope rather than a vague sense of uncertainty or even a real sense of dread.

But that transformed outlook is not just about the future: it’s about now. We can start to see things in a different light. What we believe about the future necessarily affects what we do now. We approach life with a different worldview, a different attitude. Paul, in *Romans 12*, writes about being *“transformed by the renewing of your mind”*. You start to realise that this life, what you see around you, is not all there is. Things do not have to be this way. There is an alternative – and God has started to give us glimpses of that in Jesus. That transformed worldview means that you don’t have to spend all this life striving to get more stuff and to improve your status. God provides all you need and your status is that of a dearly loved

child of God – what else could possibly matter? It means that you can reflect the love of Jesus himself as you reach out to others and as you yourself offer glimpses of the Kingdom of God in your own life.

In fact, it leads to transformed behaviour. It means behaving as Jesus would, knowing that he has the future all sewn up. As we look upon his risen glory, it affects us and the way we behave. This is what Paul writes in *2 Corinthians 3:18*:

*“And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.”*

The word Paul uses for “*transformed*” is the Greek word “*metamorphoo*” – “metamorphosis”, the transformation of, for example, a caterpillar into a butterfly: still the same creature, but noticeably different. That’s the Easter effect. You’re still going to be you, but the faith you have in God, the hope you have for the future and the way you let that affect your life, your outlook, your attitudes, your behaviour, your words – that’s what it’s all about.

The resurrection makes a difference now. Let it make a difference in your life. Enjoy today. Make the most of it and of all the joy it involves, but let that all spill over into the rest of your life – and on in to eternity!