

SERMON: Easter Sunday – The Greatest Hope

April 12, 2020

For many of us, this Holy Week has not been an easy one. People we know and love have died; others who we know are on the brink of dying. The health of the Prime Minister has raised perhaps for us all, certainly for me, the realisation that no-one is immune, that all are vulnerable. The numbers of those dying from Covid-19 continue to grow. Death has been all around us in a way that perhaps has not been experienced in this country since the war. It can feel like we are still in Good Friday; that Easter Sunday has been postponed.

Of course, on that first Easter morning, the events of the resurrection did not feel like they had been *postponed*. Such a thought would not have even occurred to the two Mary's as they approached the tomb. For you cannot postpone something that was never going to happen. Here they were, coming to pay their final respects that had been all too rushed on the eve of the sabbath.

Death for them too was all around them. Here they were in a graveyard, expecting to find armed soldiers, those ruthless purveyors of death, standing outside the tomb of one who they had seen die in front of their very eyes. There was no hope in their journey - just duty and love.

I confess that this week there have been times like that for me too. Times when in the face of the enormity of what we are going through I have struggled to find hope, and have clung on to faith through duty and love.

It takes me back to an Easter morning 27 years ago in South Africa, when just as I stood to give a joyful Easter Sunday sermon to the assembled Soweto congregation, it was announced that Chris Hani, Nelson Mandela's right-hand man, had been assassinated. Any hope of free democratic elections, of a peaceful transfer of power, seemed to evaporate that morning. We stood on the abyss. The hope that the end of years of misery and oppression was in sight was cruelly ripped away. Where was there hope that Easter morning?

We found it that day, and together we can find it together this day, in the experience of the two Marys.

For where it was least looked for, when it was least expected, hope re-surfaced, not as a weak shadow to cling to but as a brilliant blinding light dispersing darkness.

For it is in the darkness that the light shines at its brightest. In the midst of death, then in that first century graveyard, in apartheid South Africa 27 years ago, now in our coronavirus ravaged world, this Easter morning Christ's resurrection is the one place we can come to find the blinding light of hope.

People have rightly looked to find hope and positive messages through the crisis - how people have spent more time together on the phone than ever before, how the impact of climate change has shown small signs of reversing, how people have gone out of their way to help one another.

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But these are small things really when we rage against the finality of death, when we see those whom we love dying alone, when thousands are dying, lives cut short.

The one hope that can transcend this is the hope that faces death full on and overcomes it. That says that death may feel final, but it is not. That people did not die alone, but in the presence of God, and that in the presence of God, they have emerged into new life, a life of abundance and health and joy and meaning, that makes our own lives just a pale shadow of the reality they are experiencing now.

Did the two Mary's grasp the full significance of all this then, in that garden 2000 years ago. Almost certainly not. Do we grasp the full significance now? Almost certainly not either. Such things are beyond us for now, though for those who have died this week, they may be discovering more than we could ever possibly have imagined.

But the Mary's response points us to what our response can be this morning. For they fell at the risen Jesus' feet and worshipped him.

For he is indeed worthy of our worship. Worthy because somehow from the darkness he has emerged with light; somehow from the despair he has come forth offering hope; and somehow, from the chains of death he has emerged unshackled, offering all abundant life.

This Easter we can take hope from knowing that Christ has faced death full on and overcome.

When those two Marys encountered the risen Jesus in the garden that first Easter morn, they instinctively knew that everything had changed. The presence of the risen Christ changes everything. In these times, there can be no greater message of hope: Alleluia: he is risen!

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