

## **Sermon for 17<sup>th</sup> April 2022 – Year C – Easter Day**

**Preached at All Saints Biddenden and St Michael Smarden**

**Acts 10:34-43; John 20:1-18**

### **Sermon**

Easter Day is the most important day in the Christian faith. More significant even than Christmas despite all the amazing presents! If Christianity were a house, Easter would be the first stone you would put down in the ground – the foundation stone on which everything else is built.

But why? Why is this incredible story about Jesus being brought back to life after being executed by the Roman and Jewish leaders so central to the Christian faith?

I wonder, if I asked you to turn to the person sitting next to you and talk about what difference it makes that God raised Jesus from the dead, what do you think you would say? Does something immediately come into your head?

If you consider yourself a Christian, is Jesus coming back to life something that's important to your faith? Can you explain why?

This isn't a trick question, and I'm not trying to embarrass anyone. Holy Saints, and people with enormous brains have tried to figure this out for two thousand years and they certainly don't all agree.

It's a bit like that old story about a group of blindfolded people who've never seen an elephant touching different parts of the creature and trying to describe what it looks like. If you only touch the trunk, you'll imagine a very different sort of animal than if you touch a leg, or a tusk, or the tail. Only by bringing everyone's experience together can we really grasp what this elephant is.

It is the same with Easter. No one completely understands it because everyone sees it from a different angle, with different hopes and dreams.

For a start, the world today is very different from two thousand years ago. We've got computers, schools, hospitals, tv, space rockets, instant communications on the internet. We've also got global warming, environmental destruction, wars, and a pandemic to deal with. Why should we care if Jesus came back to life two thousand years ago? Don't we have more pressing concerns?

At this point, I feel like I'm about to go into a Monty Python sketch: "What did Easter ever do for us?!" Well, let's see.

Firstly, if Easter hadn't happened, if Jesus had stayed in the tomb, he would likely have been forgotten as just another Jewish teacher – charismatic perhaps, and with a reputation for healing miracles, but otherwise pretty normal for Galilee and Judea two thousand years ago.

For many early followers of Jesus, the entire point of God raising Jesus from the dead was to prove that Jesus was indeed the Son of God. So Easter is God's seal of approval on everything he said and did. Easter is why we still follow him today.

Secondly, Jesus also made another claim that was proven true at that first Easter – that there is new life after death. And Christians still believe this, that death is not the end of our story.

Two thousand years ago, physical life after death was a relatively new idea. The religious group called the Pharisees believed in it, but their rivals, the Sadducees, didn't. That's why they were sad, you see...

Anyway, this meant that when Jesus came back to life with a new body that could eat and drink and wasn't just a ghost, he proved that death is not the end, and that those who believe in him can look forward to a new body that doesn't get old or sick or die.

This may be hard to believe in for us modern scientific types, but for many early believers, this was what they most longed for. Their lives were often painful, difficult and short. Many were slaves and had no life or freedom of their own. Half were women, who also had very little power, if they even survived childbirth. Even the men had to work really hard to eat, and they were living under Roman occupation, so again had little freedom of their own. They may have been hoping that Jesus would lead a great rebellion, but when he was executed and then raised from the dead, many realised that something more important was on offer – a promise from God that this present life of struggle was not the end but something better was to come.

This is why belief in Jesus became so popular among slaves and the poor and the oppressed, and people who weren't respected by society. It gave them hope, and it gave them community. The rich and powerful already felt like they'd been blessed by God, but now the people at the bottom of society could feel like they were the true kings and queens. Jesus said, 'the first shall be last and the last shall be first', and hadn't he just proved it by coming back from the dead?

So if the first message of Easter is that God is real and Jesus is God's Son, and if the second message is that death is not the end of our lives, then the third message of Easter is that God is always ahead of us in finding ways to include more people in his family of love. No longer do people have to be born into the right family or the right country or have the right skin colour or gender to be considered important in God's sight.

You may be starting to see a pattern here. God is always more inclusive than we expect. Whatever we believe to be true about God, God says 'yes, but also this as well'. Whomever we believe can be included, God says, 'yes, but also these others, I love them too'. Through Easter, God reaches into our darkest and saddest places and says, 'do not be afraid; you also are included, you also belong. Yes, even you.'

The Easter community of Christians is a community whose members have heard Jesus calling their name, or who are longing to hear Jesus calling their name. Perhaps we are all like Mary Magdalene, alone and panicked at the empty tomb because someone has stolen Jesus' body when that was all she had left of the man whose unexpected kindness had changed her life.

Mary was on the edge of society, an outcast. When Jesus dies, she still is. She is left alone at the tomb even by the disciples Peter and John who head home. But God is always drawn to the rejected and so it's no surprise that the risen Jesus reserves his first appearance for Mary. He says her name and she is immediately transformed because of the unconditional unending love of the one who created her. Easter means that Jesus joins the people who had been pushed out to the edge by society, and he makes them the centre of everything.

Because of this experience, Mary can never be excluded again. You can't tell someone who has experienced God's unconditional love that they're wrong, that they don't believe the right things, that they don't really belong. Mary has heard the risen Jesus speak her name. She knows without a shadow of doubt that she is loved. It immediately triggers a new life in her. All her doubts are forgotten. Resurrection spreads from heart to heart.

Easter never loses its power to catch us by surprise and transform our lives. Wherever we think the boundaries are, whatever we think is possible or impossible, the Holy Spirit is always calling us excitedly to keep up, to join in, to learn the dance of unconditional love, unconditional forgiveness, unconditional welcome. Easter teaches us that there are no boundaries for love. Not even death. And it will continue to teach us this, in new ways every year, until we hear those gentle words for ourselves – “Why are you weeping?” and our hearts leap for joy.