

Easter Sunday, St Chad's Ladybarn (Year A)

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

I'd like us to think about what that declaration means?

It might sound like a silly question: he is risen means he's not dead.

It means Jesus is alive.

But to affirm that Jesus is alive provokes a whole host of questions for us, especially since we know people simply don't routinely come back to life

We could go down the line, as one of our visitors from Ladybarn Primary School did, of asking about the *mechanics* of it "How can someone be dead then alive?"

Frankly, I don't think I'm equipped or ever will be to explain that!!!

BUT I can affirm it to be true. Not because I can do some very brainy physics, but because of what the resurrection of Jesus has done.

That first Easter was like an earthquake and the aftershocks are still felt today.

And I can't explain those aftershocks in any other way other than to say that Jesus IS risen.

That said, if we obsess only about the how, we miss the bigger questions: what does it mean? If this thing happened, how does it change things, change us (does it?), how is the world different if this man rose again? If God died and returned?

Three "-tion" words - they were always my favourites in spelling tests at school "-tion" words. Don't know why. maybe I'm just odd like that! Anyway, the first "-tion" words is...

Vindication

Some of you may recall the famous Manchester United Class of '90 - the team which featured Beckham, Giggs, Scholes, Butt, Palister and Bruce. Many scoffed at the beginning of the season at Alex Ferguson's decision to pick relative youngsters to be his first-team regulars, especially when trying to win the English Premier League.

Alan Hansen, the pundit, infamously quipped "you'll never win anything with kids."

Of course, the team went on to win the league. Not only that, they proved to be the famous successful team in English top-flight football history.

Alex Ferguson was utterly vindicated. He had proved his naysayers wrong.

Vindication.

At its worst it can be synonymous with "I told you so". It's easy to feel smug when we're vindicated!

But sometimes it can be a delight when a tentative decision works out well; when we work at something against the odds and naysayers, and achieve.

Easter is vindication of the claim that Jesus is the Messiah, the promised one of God. What he claimed was true. Rome executed him; God the Father vindicated him.

“How can the Messiah die in disgrace, as an utter failure?”

Easter is God’s “yes” to Jesus, and God’s “no” to the powers that killed him.

If that is true, why does God say “yes” to today? What does God affirm and call us to affirm?

Easter means Jesus is Lord, not Caesar, not Caiaphas, but also not any of the many empires and powers that seek to rule our worlds.

What, in our world, does God’s vindication of Jesus say “no” to?

Christ’s death was to a momentary aberration in an otherwise well-functioning world.

He was a victim of what was actually the system doing what the system was designed to do. God’s raising up of Jesus is a “no” to that system, to every system that makes victims, that executes, that turns to violence and coercion, that treats anyone as expendable.

Easter Sunday is a big fat NO to evil - ALL evil. Not just the evil over there, but the evil that infects all our world.

And it is a resounding YES to the Jesus way.

But are we ready to embrace that way today?

Reconciliation

We use that word, reconciliation in a few different ways, don’t we?

There’s the sense of making everything fit together: that which seemed like a muddle, a mess, a problem that couldn’t be solved.

For example, in accounting, reconciliation is getting all the numbers to make sense and fit.

We speak too about irreconcilable ideas: things which are contradictory.

God as both Lord and suffering servant: only Easter can reconcile these two things.

What ideas about God and what we expect or what of God do we need to let go of, because they simply cannot be reconciled with Jesus the suffering Messiah, the humble Lord, the crucified AND risen one?

The other sense of reconciliation is to do with our relationships.

Again, you've probably heard people speak of - or remarked yourself - about a relationship that has broken down due to irreconcilable differences. It is a common, though sad occurrence.

Easter is an act of reconciliation for those who believed all hope of that reconciliation was gone. That was it, Good Friday was the loss of any chance of Jesus' disciples making good on their grand declarations of loyalty.

Words couldn't be taken back, denial couldn't be undone. Or so it seemed...

The resurrection isn't just a physical miracle. **It is forgiveness demonstrated in the most remarkable way possible.** The victim returns not for revenge or to blame or shame but to forgive.

Think of Peter on the beach after the resurrection: the one who denied Jesus is restored and given responsibility to be a shepherd to the church.

Think of Paul whose letter we heard from a little earlier. the persecutor of Jesus followers meets the risen Christ and finds in that encounter not wrath but forgiveness, ***what we call grace.***

It's not just for them, back then, either. The Risen Christ spoke to Peace to his disciples when he met them on that Sunday. He speaks Peace to us today. He has been vindicated by God not to laud his majesty over us, but to reconcile us to himself as friends.

What does it mean to be transformed by THAT kind of forgiveness?

How does that alter how you see the irreconcilable, the unforgivable, the hopeless situations in your life, your neighbourhood, our world?

New Creation

... has begun with the Resurrection.

It's often been the tendency of the church to miss what is going on in the resurrection and skipping straight to seeing it as about "life after death".

If we pay attention though we see big clues that the resurrection is about HERE and NOW not simply what happens when we each die.

The Jewish hope for resurrection was a hope for a general resurrection on the 'last day.' Even for those Jews who believed in resurrection — which was common in the First Century — the idea of only one person being resurrected in advance of the end would have been completely strange.

When I say the first witnesses really didn't expect it, it's not just that they had hangups about how it would work scientifically for someone to go from "dead" to "alive". Far more than that, it just wasn't what they expected God to be about, it wasn't part of their world of expectation about how God works out his plan.

It gives me reason, apart from anything else, to believe that the Easter story isn't a fabrication: it's too strange, and contains too much that confounded Jewish (never mind Gentile) expectations.

But more than that, God raising Jesus in the middle of history tells me that God's new creation has already started.

This isn't just a sign that we might get another chance after we're dead and buried. It's the first act in a new creation God has begun, that continue HERE and NOW.

I spoke of clues:

The account of Mary encountering Jesus in the garden is very obviously intended to mirror the story of the Garden of Eden. Tom Wright calls Mary Magdalene's mistaking Jesus for the gardener 'the right kind of mistake,' because John's story is, after all, about the dawning of the New Creation.

Going back two days, John even understands Good Friday as the sixth day of creation, when human beings were made. Pilate says, akin to God on that sixth day, "Behold the man!" And Jesus signals the end of the six days of the first creation, crying out from the cross, "It is finished." The sabbath day follows; God rested. But then, "Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark," the eighth day has dawned, the first day of a New Creation.

Later, the Emmaus Road also points us back to Genesis: a couple encounter God walking with them in the evening yet their eyes need to be opened to the full reality of what is happening. In an inversion of the garden of Eden, though, their eyes being opened leads to joy not shame.

I hope you can start to see that Easter is so much bigger than maybe we have understood: this isn't about life after death, heaven when we die.

Easter is like a second Big Bang: God's new creation, God's reconciling of all things has begun through the suffering servant - the divine man executed by Rome but vindicated by God his Father.

What does it mean today, for you, for me?

I believe we must allow Easter to question, to interrogate, to rearrange all that we think is important, to allow ourselves to be rearranged by the truth that Jesus is Lord, today, here, now. To live in a new way which is gracious, forgiving, hopeful.

Jesus is risen, therefore we have work ahead of us. This is no time to sit and wait to die because we know there's a heaven. As Paul reminds us in Colossians, we need to begin to think about life and this world from a heavenly perspective, from God's perspective.

God invites you, me, now to be participants in his new creation.

We have reason to LIVE in hope not just to face death with consolation.
Jesus is risen, there is work to do.

Amen.