

DEFIANT HOPE

Luke 24:1-6a; John 20:19-22; Romans 8:35-39; 1 Corinthians 15:50, 54-58

Wangaratta, Easter Sunday, 20/4/14

There never seems to be a shortage of bad news, does there? I'm sure most of us have been following the saga of Malaysian Airlines flight MH370 over these past few weeks. We can only imagine what it's been like for the families of those missing. I guess by now they've pretty much given up hope of seeing them again; the best they can hope for is finding the plane so they can at least know something of what happened.

We're fairly used to news of unrest and political upheaval in the Middle East, and the start of 2014 has seen this continue, with Syria in all kinds of trouble. I don't pretend to understand what's going on with Russia and the Ukraine, but it doesn't sound good either, does it; and it doesn't look like ending any time soon.

Closer to home, and we keep hearing bad news about the economy, and what our government will have to do to rein in debt, and how long it will take to bring the budget back into surplus. We're told we're still emitting as much carbon as ever.

Over Christmas we were waiting for council to deal with our planning application for our extensions. We were pleased to get our permit. Making it conditional on sealing our carpark was *not* what we wanted to hear. News of David's illness as it unfolded came as a real shock to us, and we're still struggling to come to terms with it.

What has life been like for you leading up to Easter 2014? Have you had your share of difficulties too? Are you ready for some good news?

The world is still a tough, and sometimes sad and lonely place; a dangerous place where things still go wrong. We are not isolated from our world, or immune to its troubles. But there is still much that is good, and positive, and beautiful and true. The Apostle Paul urges us to direct our thoughts to these things, and Easter Sunday gives us a framework for doing that.

For those first disciples, life could not have been more dismal and depressing than it was on the Friday and Saturday. Sunday brought a very different perspective. Sunday was all about life and hope. This Easter morning we won't dismiss lightly the difficulties we face and the real sadness we experience in the light of the suffering around us. But Easter Sunday breaks through to restore our perspective, and renew our hope, and our resolve to press on. Today is

I. A Day of Rejoicing.

There's something special about Good Friday. Wasn't it a great service here, as we gathered with our friends from across the churches? It's good to stop and remember our privileges. Somebody paid for what we enjoy today. Somebody *else* paid. The least we can do is stop, and with a gratitude we struggle to express, acknowledge our debt and our thankfulness. We're a bit subdued on Good Friday. Death and sacrifice are serious subjects. The benefits are overwhelming. The cost Jesus bore in obtaining them for us is very humbling. Could he really love us that much?

This morning our celebrations reflect a very different mood. Jesus is alive! We take our cue from the way those first disciples responded to the news as it unfolded. The first Easter Sunday got off to

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A. An Amazing Start.

We can imagine the mood of the women as they headed for the garden in the half light of dawn; setting out to complete the task time had beaten them to on Friday. They came with spices to anoint Jesus' dead body. They came to pay their last respects; an act of love and devotion; in their minds, the last thing they could do for the one who had done so much for them; someone they really loved. It would have been a sacred moment, if everything had gone as planned. Such a privilege! Such a sad and emotionally touching thing to do.

Well, things certainly *didn't* go as planned! Not that they minded having their plans disrupted I'm sure; not when the real story emerged.

We're familiar with the story and the scene that greeted the women as they arrived at the tomb. Everything was in disarray. The big stone they were worried about had been rolled away. No sign of the guards assigned to protect the tomb. Inside the tomb, no sign of the body they'd come to anoint.

And then, to top it off, two angels! Don't you love the way they presented their amazing news? "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" What are you doing... in a cemetery? There are only dead people here! And then, more specifically: "He is not here. He has risen!"

I wonder what became of those spices? Dropped and forgotten I imagine, as those excited women abandoned their dignity and ran to tell this best of all possible news to the disciples. What an amazing start to this day of rejoicing.

Let's jump to the other end of the day. There we find the disciples huddled together behind locked doors for fear of the Jews. And we struggle to piece it together. Surely they had heard ... something! Somehow, the good news hadn't sunk in. And I guess, since nothing like this had ever happened before, an empty tomb and some hysterical women wouldn't necessarily lead them to conclude there'd been a resurrection! Probably we'd have reacted the same way.

Then Jesus came and stood among them, and they had their

B. Irrefutable Evidence.

I get sad, and a bit angry, when people who call themselves Christians question the facts of the resurrection. "It's not really important if he was raised physically or not," they try to tell us.

Which Bible do they read? Or which parts of the Bible are they certain they can believe? My Bible tells me beyond the shadow of a doubt that Jesus was physically raised to new life. It tells me that if Christ has not been raised, then my faith is futile and I'm still dead in my sins. *Not very important?* It tells me that if we have hope in this life *only*, then we are to be pitied more than anyone else.

Some of these accounts were written by men who stood in that room and saw themselves the nail holes in Jesus' hands and the spear wound in his side. Try telling them it doesn't really matter if Jesus was physically raised or not!

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Wangaratta, Easter Sunday, 20/4/14

Those disciples didn't expect to see Jesus again. They didn't believe the story the women told them. They were afraid of what the Jews may do to them. But when they saw Jesus themselves, they were so convinced most of them ultimately gave their lives proclaiming the truth of his resurrection. "Peace be with you," Jesus said, and he showed them his hands and his side; and the disciples were

C. Overjoyed!

It's a great word, isn't it? I don't think I've ever heard of someone simply being "joyed." Those disciples were *overjoyed*, when they saw the Lord. It was all true. He really was alive! The unthinkable had happened. All that had been lost was now restored, and then some.

We see an instant transformation in the disciples. And we can understand this. There was heartbroken Mary; devastated by Jesus' death and distraught at the thought his body had been tampered with. Sorrow distorted her perspective, and tears stopped her seeing Jesus. Until he spoke to her by name, and her sorrow turned to joy.

There was fickle Peter, so strong and brave among his friends, and boastful with it. So intimidated by a hostile crowd, and spooked by a young servant girl. We see a very different Peter after the resurrection, after Jesus spoke with him privately, and especially after the Day of Pentecost.

And there's Doubting Thomas, absent when the others saw Jesus, unwilling or unable to accept evidence he'd not seen personally. He needed to be sure, and when he saw Jesus himself, he fell down and worshipped him. What about you and me?

No wonder we celebrate this day! It's the best day of the year! And it represents the best day of our lives; the day we met Jesus personally and decided to place our trust on him for the rest of our lives, and the rest of eternity.

I'm sure many of the implications of that first Easter were lost on those first disciples. Jesus was alive! That was enough. It was left to a later time, and someone like Paul to describe all the benefits of this wonderful day. And as we turn to what Paul wrote, he gives us, firstly,

II. A Realistic Appraisal.

Here's something else some Christians try to tell us that makes me sad, and a bit cross. "Since I became a Christian," they seem to say, "all my problems have disappeared, and life is wonderful all the time."

Again, we have to ask which Bible they read. My Bible records Jesus saying, "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." Experience tells us becoming a Christian doesn't remove our problems, and Paul reminds us

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A. We Will Have Difficulties.

Life is not a bed of roses for those who follow Jesus. In fact, it sometimes seems we take on a whole new set of problems when we take seriously Jesus' challenge to live for him. Some things the world promotes we can't take part in. Sometimes the stand we take to be true to him places us at odds with others; sometimes our own families. Quite apart from these problems, the resurrection and our faith in Jesus do not free us from the effects of living in our sinful world.

After we've accumulated a few years, we soon notice

B. Time Takes Its Toll.

Have you found that? If you haven't, just wait! Now ageing has its benefits, too; we like to think we accumulate some wisdom, along with the years and experience. But it comes at a price. I caught up with our good friend Ian last week in Bright; and he's starting to seem frail. The spark is still there, and his love for God is undiminished; but his body is failing, and he gets a bit frustrated when he can't remember a name. I think he does remarkably well for ninety-six!

But time takes its toll. And you don't have to be ninety-six before you start to notice it. It's ridiculous to suggest that the resurrection and our faith remove in this life, every problem we would otherwise experience. They don't. They were never intended to; and we do ourselves, and others, and *God* a disservice if we try to paint a picture of our faith other than the way God has designed it. And in this context,

C. Death is a Reality.

One day, unless Jesus returns first, we will all walk through what Psalm 23 calls "the valley of the shadow of death." "It is appointed unto us once to die," we read in Hebrews "and then the judgement."

The message of Easter has nothing to do with wishful thinking; it does not turn a blind eye to the very real suffering many Christians experience. It does not gloss over the reality of death, or try to pretend it is anything other than the traumatic experience each of us will face, on our way to eternal realities which remain largely unknown. "For your sake," Paul writes, "we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." Christianity, and the resurrection especially is not denial; and Christians of all people, in spite of what others may say, see life and death as they really are.

But we see both life and death in the context of the resurrection; and this gives us

III. Unshakeable Confidence;

and an unconquerable hope. This morning, I've called it a *defiant hope*.

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Wangaratta, Easter Sunday, 20/4/14

Everything looked hopeless and the disciples had given up. Their morale was shattered, and their spirits broken as they hid away in that locked room; and then Jesus came. A few days earlier he'd been battered, tortured and crucified. There was nothing more they could have done to him. He was dead, and now he is alive. Death, once so permanent, would never be seen the same again; not by those who knew Jesus. To use Paul's terminology,

A. The Sting has Been Removed.

It's been years since I was last stung by a bee, and I hope it never happens again. Last time, I had a rather unpleasant allergic reaction. I treat bees with a healthy respect these days. But show me a bee without the capacity to sting and my attitude changes. It's not the *bee* that concerns me, it's the *sting*.

Many times, Paul faced dangerous situations, and enemies who wanted to kill him. And he responds defiantly. "Death has been swallowed up in victory," he claims, because of the resurrection. "Where, O death, is your victory? Where O death is your sting?" Paul knew that even if his enemies killed him (which they ultimately did) they hastened his departure to be with Jesus.

Let's continue to be realistic. The timing of our death still bothers us; and the process, often, is not pleasant. Death separates us from those we love, even though we know this will be temporary. Many unknowns remain. But the sting has been removed. Sin, and its consequences prescribed by the law have been dealt with separately. Someone else has paid the price. And when it comes time for us to walk through that valley with its shadows, Jesus will walk with us. He knows the way. He's already been through it. We're safe with him.

Paul's confidence is based on his knowledge and experience of God's love; and he assures us

B. Nothing Separates Us

from that unfathomable love. His list of possibilities is pretty comprehensive here, isn't it? Not trouble, hardship, persecution; famine, nakedness or sword. Not death, life, angels, demons. Absolutely nothing separates us from God's love.

And Paul practised what he taught. See Paul and Silas, after a severe beating and an unjust imprisonment, sitting in prison, at midnight, singing hymns! I wonder what they sang. "And Can It Be" probably! Followed by "Great is Thy Faithfulness", "Blessed Assurance" and "How Great Thou Art!" A defiant hope, in the face of otherwise overwhelming odds. "Bring on your worst!" Paul seems to say; "Jesus is alive, and he and I can handle it! Nothing separates us from his love."

And in Romans 8 he describes those who follow Jesus as

C. "More than Conquerors."

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Wangaratta, Easter Sunday, 20/4/14

There are days when I *don't feel* like a conqueror! There are days when I start to think, this is all a bit hard. Sometimes, I look at the world around us, and the church's apparent failure to make inroads into our culture. Sometimes, the church seems to be retreating as our culture threatens to take over; and I wonder, where is the victory Paul proclaims? Then I remember, we are more than conquerors *through him who loved us*.

Although we long for the church to triumph, and society to be transformed by its salt and light, we're conquerors because God's love resides within us. His love has conquered our rebellious spirits. The church may be mocked and ridiculed in society as irrelevant; morality may continue to spiral downwards; *nothing separates us from the love of God*. We are more than conquerors.

"If God is with us," Paul asks a little earlier, "Who can be against us?"

I'm not quite ready yet to surrender to a declining morality, or to dismiss the possibility of our collective influence turning our culture around. But regardless of these things happening, God gives us the victory through our risen Lord Jesus Christ.

"Therefore," Paul concludes, "stand firm."

There are great theological implications in the resurrection. But its primary benefits are practical. It gives us hope, a defiant hope, as we face the challenges of living day by day.

Stand firm, Paul tells us. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord. Jesus is risen!