

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter  
Year B - 25/4/2021

Acts 4:5-12  
Psalm 23  
1John 3:16-24  
John 10:11-18

**In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...**

I have said it before, and I will say it again - unless what we claim as the truth of the Easter story changes our lives, it remains just an interesting, although admittedly extraordinary story.

It is true that the Christian faith has been much maligned over the last few decades or so. Even when its positive aspects are emphasized, we have to deal with sentiments like this, found in Alain de Botton's book, "Religion For Atheists", when he talks about how positive Christianity can be, "if you can just get rid of the embarrassing beliefs that go with it."

The beliefs that go along with the resurrection story of Easter are, I think, those which he would class as embarrassing - difficult to understand and accept. But it is the core belief that we must proclaim and which must change us. It is contained in the proclamation of the new Christian faith, as we hear it in Peter's speech before the Sanhedrin in this morning's First Reading,

"... we are not told that the story of the empty tomb is a beautiful imaginative creation that offers inspiration to all sorts of people; we are not told that the message of Jesus lives on; we are told that God did something... God raised Jesus to life!" God *did* something... and this divine action opened up... for all people, for all time... an "unprecedented possibility" ... that is, the possibility of new life.

So far so good... but then what? When it comes to resurrection life, what are we proclaiming to the world? I can remember the church of my youth, teaching me two things about resurrection.

1. Mainly back then it seemed to be a proof of triumphal doctrinal certainty... That is, the resurrection proved that Jesus was God's Son... which meant that we Christians were right and everyone else was wrong! But that really isn't that helpful, and certainly doesn't teach anything positive about new life.

2. The second thing that was emphasized was that the resurrection meant that after we died, we would go to heaven... which might progressively become more significant news for us as we age... but because I understand more about Jesus speaking of the new life being here and now... that hasn't helped me much either.

So with that in mind, how on earth are we to talk about this experience of resurrection life. (As *experience* not just doctrine.) I think that one of the important aspects of Easter is that the resurrection shocks us into recognizing that the world is not the way we always thought it was... It is that jolt of realising... 'I always thought reality was like this... but now I see that it is something quite different... indeed it is much, much more than I ever imagined. It's the experience of everyone who encounters Jesus in the resurrection stories, and it's the invitation for us, also.

Rowan Williams explains it like this... "Resurrection is a shocking novelty... something done for us and to us, not by us. How do we know that it is (real)? Not by some final... scientific proof, but by the way it works in us through the long story of a whole life... We learn and assimilate its truth by the risk of living it..."

So we only ever 'get' resurrection life, by having a go at living it... exploring it. We learn and assimilate its truth by the risk of living it...

We can see how this plays out as we look at the Apostle Paul... Who as Saul, before his own resurrection experience, saw life as a world where one needed to strive for perfection, in order to be counted righteous in God's sight... which meant outdoing everyone else in keeping the law and ritual observance, and being so correct that he even zealously persecuted the new Christian church.

But who after encountering the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus, came to see that it was not like that at all - in fact life was about God's outrageous grace... an approval given to us regardless of our worthiness... and that he was free to live a life of unimaginable love and service.

There is for Saul a moment of dramatic encounter and conversion on the Damascus road... but the new life does not come with the miraculous instant flicking of a cosmic switch. The new man Paul, has to learn what it means to live in a world of grace, by exploring it... by wrestling with a whole new way of being... by trying things out, making mistakes, repenting and trying again... constantly refining and deepening his understanding of what this new freedom in God's approval means. That's what we can hear and see in his letters... Paul exploring and learning resurrection life, by taking the risk of living it.

This is what Rowan is saying... 'You'll learn nothing more by looking; at some point you have to decide whether you want to try to live with it and in it.' This is our Easter process... It begins with the shock of recognition - 'so life's not like I thought or expected'... and the dawn of novel possibility - 'in fact Christ says it's actually much bigger than I ever imagined'... and the next step is... exploration!

For this to be more than an interesting head-confined idea for us, we need to take the risk of putting-down our old habits and assumptions, and having a go at exploring a radically new space... that new world described by Christ as the Kingdom! And it is exploration... for resurrection is a totally new and different world... a foreign land we've never travelled before. It's a new life... not a perfected idealized version of the old.

Because resurrection takes us into this unknown land, nothing is obvious at first... we often don't know what to do or how to be! We are like explorers being lured deeper and deeper into the jungle following the call of the Spirit as she calls and leads us into new life.

This is the exact opposite of the dogmatic certainty the church of my youth promised me - this is exploration of an unknown world... where like Paul before us, we learn by trial and error, what it means to live in God's abundant grace and approval... what it means to be free.

“You’ll learn nothing more by looking”, Rowan says; “at some point you have to decide whether you want to try to live with it and in it.”

Resurrection is not a truth to be proved, but the uncertain risk of a new world to explore. May the risen Christ lead us on in our journey and our exploration.

In the name of God. Amen.