

Resurrection - the space in between

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 1 April 2018

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Easter Day B

Mark: 16: 1-8; John 20: 1-18

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under "Sunday Gatherings" tab

Today we have heard two gospel accounts of the resurrection, one from Mark's gospel and the other from John's Gospel. This is not normal. Each year, preachers are supposed to choose either John - or one of Matthew, Mark or Luke, depending on which year of the lectionary we are in. I often agonise over which one to use when I'm preparing the Easter liturgy - which happens long before I'm doing the sermon.

This year, reflecting on how very different the readings are, I thought perhaps there might be a place for both. They are dramatically different, but we are used to hearing them blended together as they were in the children's story.

But they are different! In Mark's Gospel, there is a resurrection announcement, but no appearance. The response of the women is fear and silence.

But in John's gospel, there is an appearance. Mary hears her name - and there is intimacy and presence, assurance and hope.

As I looked more carefully at them though, I saw that, despite these differences, there was a common thread that I had not seen before... a detail in each story as surprising as the resurrection itself. In Mark 16: 7 the messenger at the empty tomb tells the women, "*Jesus is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.*" And in John 20:17, Jesus says to Mary Magdalene: "*But go to my sisters and brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Abba and your Abba, to my God and your God.'*"

This common thread? The resurrection is not the end of the story. We will leave the mystery of the ascension for another day. But the resurrection is not the end of the story.

Easter Sunday is about joy and hope and hallelujahs, about beautiful music, about flowers signifying new life amongst that which seemed to be dead. It's about the power of life over all that denies life, about love and liberation; but within these stories there is the reminder that this is not the place where the story ends. The empty tomb is not the place where our Christian lives are to be lived. Easter must be about Easter Monday as much as it is about Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

On the afternoon of this Good Friday, I had a nap. I'd worked rather late the previous night finishing the power point of the stations of the cross, and particularly on the image of the little girl dancing in the rain that accompanied the song that we heard again this morning about seeing God in the darkness, dancing in the rain.

After my nap, I picked up a voicemail message and an email from a Reuters reporter asking about our Easter Sunday service. How wonderful!

But what she wanted to know was if we would be preaching about, and praying for, the remorseful Australian cricketers who had been found out tampering with a cricket ball in South Africa. She wondered if their remorse would provide grounds for thinking about forgiveness at our Easter Sunday worship. And if so, could she bring a team to film our service.

You will note that they are not here, because I emailed back that we probably wouldn't be talking about cricket (and yet here I am) on Sunday because I said there are greater failures of morality in Australia which we should be focused on. I wrote about things like the asylum seekers imprisoned on Manus and Nauru for years, about the deaths of Aboriginal people in prison and detention, and the damage done to our environment by mineral extraction.

I told her in the email about my frustration that the 'scandal' of ball tampering had eclipsed the scandals that really matter, pointing out that on the day news of the cricket scandal broke thousands of Australians, secular people and people of faith, including people from our community marched for justice for refugees. There were rallies all around the country that were completely ignored by the media because of the cricket.

I wrote that: *"Far more important for me than remorseful sporting celebrities is bearing witness to the broken physical and mental health of hundreds of people held for more than four years on Manus and Nauru, especially the children on Nauru who have spent most of their lives there, whose very humanity has been destroyed in the in the name of our security."*

And I asked: *what does resurrection mean now in the face of that evil, and in all the other broken places of the world?*

Since then I think the same could be said of the government's two sentence dismissal in response to the report on indigenous incarceration that came during the week.

I wrote to her, that at Pitt Street we would be talking about resurrection as a way of life, so that we will live as if we truly believe that people will be compassionate, that justice will be done, and that there will be peace on earth.

With some compassion I added that: *"I hope that, for the cricketers, their remorse would translate into lives lived for a greater purpose than sport, celebrity and money."*

And then I gave her the contact details for the Synod media team in case they might know of a church that could be more helpful.

She wrote back appreciatively but the truth is that this Easter proclamation is not the news that the "powers that be" want to hear.

The other story, the one that I think she was looking for, the one where Jesus pays the price for our personal sins, like ball tampering, so that we might be forgiven is a story that does not destabilise the order of things. It does not threaten the powerful elites in government or in media corporations that seek profit above people.

This personalised version of the impact of Jesus life and death, as a cosmic transaction in which God's demand for punishment is satisfied by the sacrifice of Jesus' life, serves to maintain the status quo. It asks no questions about Easter Monday – except that we believe that version of the story.

The media response to the cricket scandal and the lack of interest in stories of transformation, in the doing of justice, the expression of compassion, and the making of peace, reminded me of the tour of the Roman Colosseum that Clare and I did in Rome in 2016. Our guide was a brilliant young historian. She explained about the political purpose of the enormously expensive entertainment provided by the Roman rulers, in which gladiators killed wild animals and disposable people, to keep the populace distracted and happy.

In 140 BCE, in order to keep the votes of poorer citizens, Roman politicians introduced a grain dole and funded the spectacle of the Colosseum.

Bread and circuses maintained their power.

With distracted minds, and full stomachs, the people turned their attention away from the violence and the oppression that were the real heart of the empire's power.

But in the occupied provinces, they were not so lucky. In Jerusalem and the Galilee, the people had no votes and the violence was unvarnished. Jesus death, was a message to the people that the consequences of questioning religious and political power was death on a cross, on the outside of the city. The one whose non-violent resistance brought common people to a realisation that society could be structured justly, that life could be lived differently, was disposed of as a terrifying example.

Bread and circuses for some. Terror for others. Media entertainment masquerading as news for us. Lives lived without hope, mental and physical health neglected even to the point of death for people seeking asylum in Australia who come here by boat. Either way, power and wealth are maintained in the hands of a few.

But power also consists in deciding which story will be told. And we choose to tell the story of life even in the face of suffering and death.

On this Easter morning, we can turn again to our ancient stories from Mark and from John, calling us to pay attention, calling us to bear witness, even in times when there seems little hope of change.

We can hear the voice of Jesus, telling us that the empty tomb is not the end of the story. We can hear the voice of God calling us to participate in the work of resurrection.

Yes, Jesus the Human One, is gone. But the memory and the hope and the power live on. There is resurrection: because we are gathered together in this place, knowing that in this story that we are connected to the source of life and love, participating in a hope that does not make sense according to the wisdom of the world. And that this hope will strengthen us for the work of transformation that leads us on to Easter Monday.

Mark's strange ending directs attention away from claims of supernatural interventions and focuses on everyday human experience. The question is no longer whether we can put aside our scientific world-view and believe that God would breach the laws of nature. The question is whether the story of Jesus connects with what we already know of life.

So, if we are to follow, if we are to have faith we must do as the text tells us: we must return to Galilee. There we meet Jesus again: in his life, in his words, in his actions, exposing ourselves to courageous compassion, until insight dawns and conviction grows strong, that this is how we too are to live.

In returning to Galilee, we see again the passion of Jesus that led to his execution. His passion was the dream of God, what life on earth would be like if God reigned, and the rulers, domination systems and the empires of this world did not. It is the world that the prophets dreamed of—a world of distributive justice in which everyone has enough, and the systems are fair.

It is a political dream but it is not just a political dream. It is God's dream, a dream that can only be realized by being grounded more deeply in the reality of God, of the sacred, of the energy, of the heart of the universe. That is justice and compassion. Faith in the resurrection is faith that God has vindicated Jesus, has said yes to all that Jesus lived and died for.

Easter is personal as well as political. It involves a deep centering in the holy, a deep centering in the sacred that includes radical trust, the same trust that we see in Jesus. It generates in us love and freedom and courage. It involves loyalty to God's passion as revealed in Jesus, a passion for compassion, justice and nonviolence.

Resurrection is not an escape from death, but an invitation to live life with passion for justice and for love.

Resurrection is not an escape from life, but an invitation to embrace the mystery of life.

Resurrection is a living symbol of re-creation, of God's perpetual creativity amongst the people of God, amongst us – here and now.

There's one final thing from which we must not be distracted by bread and circuses.

As with the love of Jesus, our own love means nothing until we can give it away. Wherever love is reborn in our hearts, Jesus saves us. And we save one another. With every kind word. With every gentle touch. And yes with the gift of forgiveness – even for cricketers.

And in the quest for peace, we teach one another the Easter message: That love alone remains.