

Easter Day 2009

Easter Resurrection

Acts 10.34-43; 1 Cor. 15.1-11; Mk 16.1-8

What can we know for certain? What can we know for certain?

In the eastern part of the old city of Jerusalem, just behind the rather dreary bus station, is something remarkably relevant for us this morning. It was first noticed in 1883 by Charles George Gordon, Lord Gordon of Khartoum, when he was on a visit to the Holy City. Gordon thought that the hill just to the north of the city walls was Golgotha – the place of the skull, and that description tied in rather well with what he found. Just beyond the bus station perimeter wall is a two-chambered rock tomb set within a beautiful flower garden, now looked after by the Garden Tomb Association. It probably dates from the early centuries AD. It's dug out of the solid rock, and has a main chamber with a recess and a shelf, and a very large circular doorway. It's not difficult to imagine a huge circular stone being rolled up to close it, and then being rolled away again to open it. Is it our Lord's burial place? Well, who can tell, but then, as somebody once said, "We don't need to worship a place".

Can we imagine ourselves on the scene at that first Easter morning? A great hush had come down on Jerusalem. Jesus had been buried in great haste. His criminal status had placed restrictions on the burial rites, and now three brave women were taking a great risk in coming to complete the funeral process, and to sit there weeping. Not one man of all the men that Jesus knew in his life was present; not one man was available to roll back that great circular stone. This fact alone tells me the truth of the story, for if it was a mediaeval account, no woman would have been allowed anywhere near the scene as a witness.

The custom was to visit a grave for the three days following a funeral. The women had arrived quite unaware of what they would find. An angel tells the women what has happened. The miracle of miracles is revealed to three women. The tomb is empty. What would we think or feel if we went to a funeral and found the coffin empty? Some sort of practical joke perhaps? Or that the deceased had not really died? The angel tells them not to be afraid: Jesus is not here; he has been raised to life. The women run out terrified – they are astonished and speechless. We might remember here that in the other gospels none of the men are recorded as saying anything at the tomb either. They too were afraid, until Peter took

the plunge and went in. Now Mark brings his gospel to a sudden and dramatic close. In doing that he stresses Jesus' awesome power – our Lord astounded people by what he did in life, and now he does it again by what he does in his death and resurrection.

In not much more than a 100 words Mark describes to us the events by which 2000 years of Christian history stand or fall – a few verses without which our faith is vain and empty. Instead of shouting and dismay and noise and confusion, there is silence – the silence of religious awe, the mystery that makes men and women tremble – the unexpected, the inexplicable – this strange and giddy experience that makes the women fly headlong out of the tomb. Just as it made the apostles flee from the upper room a few days before.

The story unfolding is the common ground uniting all of us – the gospel of Christ crucified and risen again. The power of God to overcome evil and death is THE one great argument against those who deny the resurrection of the dead. The irony here is that the disciples have already fled, presumably to start their journeys home, and left their dead master behind them. Ah, but it's not so, for Jesus will get to Galilee before they do.

As to what actually happened on that morning we cannot know. It is God's mystery. We are not meant to know all things. If we knew the identity of the unknown soldier in Westminster Abbey, would that change our view of war, or life and death? The mystery is sometimes comforting and offers us hope.

In this season of joy and celebration, let us be still and silent, and even solemn, for this is holy ground. The mystery and wonder and awe of the resurrection should overwhelm us – as they did the early Christians. We watch and wait, and when we greet the risen Lord it is with awe and trembling.

Today it is enough to say, as St Thomas did, "My Lord and My God!" For 2000 years the resurrection has inspired writers and scholars and artists and musicians – many of the greatest works of human creation were born of it. This Tuesday evening the great vault of Westminster Abbey will resound to the glories of Handel's Messiah – the composer whose last wish was granted – to die on Easter Day. Others have commercialised the resurrection or tried to wear down its fantastical strangeness, but the fact remains that people have encountered Christ in their lives every day of every year since the resurrection.

That resurrection is for us, for you and for me. It doesn't matter what your pedigree is, or your gender, or your sexuality, or whether you are married, or divorced or widowed or single. God accepts each and every one of us who looks to him with hope and anticipation. He accepts anyone who is trying to implement justice and to love others. Nothing in our life is the final word, not even death itself.

The resurrected Christ empowered his followers to continue his work, to be bearers of his love, to be healers in his name, and to work for justice and peace. Christians have been killed or persecuted or reviled or dismissed, but still the Good News lives on. Two thousand years of trying to eliminate it have been an utter failure. Schools and hospitals and day care centres, nursing homes and support groups, and thousands of charities are the eloquent daily witness to the Good News. People have met Christ's forgiving love and put their past behind them. They have found peace of mind and purpose to meet their daily changes.

Easter is new life. Jesus defeated death and in his great love he calls each of us by name and invites us to new life. If we want proof of the resurrection, the only way is to take a risk and look for its signs in our lives. Countless thousands have obeyed his great injunction "Follow Me", and now he is saying it to us. There will be challenges and conflicts, and perhaps also suffering, in order to discover the truth, but Christ is risen and calls us to journey with him.

Jesus told the disciples that he was going before them to Galilee. Not to Jerusalem, but to Galilee. In biblical times Galilee stood for the world, for everywhere and nowhere, that is, the secular, the ordinary and the everyday world. The rich and comfortable people of Jerusalem wanted no connection with a Messiah from Galilee – how could he possibly appear from there? But it was to be - they would not see their Lord again amongst the sacred and holy places of that great city, not in Jerusalem, but amongst the ordinary and secular, the everyday world of the villages around Galilee.

The very places where they had been born and grown up and had been fishermen and tax collectors before Jesus told them to "Come and follow me". They had expected to spend their lives as fisherman and tax collectors, but it was not to be, and their world was turned upside down. "And there you will see him, as He told you". Jesus always intended this. That they would see him in the Galilee of the Gentiles, in the world which God loved.

The clear message is that we meet Christ by getting our hands dirty – in the needs of others. The veil of the temple had been torn down, that barrier between the sacred and the secular – the unholy had been made holy by Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection. The other gospels tell us that the disciples lingered in Jerusalem because they believed that Christ could establish his throne only among the power and privilege of the church, as though today we insisted that Christ is to be found in, say Canterbury, but not in the Medway Towns. The truth is that our Lord goes before us in all of our own little secular worlds – of Whitstable, or Herne Bay, or Folkestone – in all places, yours and mine.

He goes before us so that we can never capture him. But he is there in all that we do, all the people we meet, in all our needs that take up our time and our energy and our prayers. He comes in the hesitant and the confused, he comes in the broken bread and the wine, he comes in kindness and smiling, and in the changeableness and irritating habits of other people. But yet he does come to make all things new again – to breathe life onto the dry bones of our church and our fellowship. He comes if we are prepared to call on his name, because the stone has been rolled back and the tomb is empty.

Again, let us ask ourselves, What can we know for certain? What can we know for certain?

Jesus Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia ! Amen !