

St. Aidan's West Epping, Easter Day 21st April 2019
“HOPE OUT OF DARKNESS”

**(Acts 10:34-43; Psalm 118:1-2,14-24; 1 Corinthians 15:19-26;
John 20:1-18)**

I imagine that a number of us have had the opportunity to visit the great cathedral of Notre-Dame in Paris. Even if we haven't been there, we will have been aware of it as one of the great church buildings of Europe, with its great towers, its impressive entrance, its marvellous rose windows and wonderful stained glass, its grand organ, its soaring roof and arches, its fascinating gargoyles, not to mention its wonderful art and its collection of relics. Many of us will have been shocked when we heard of the devastating fire just a few days ago. We can only begin to imagine its home.

The first pictures made me wonder whether the whole cathedral would be destroyed, but despite the terrible damage, it seems that much of the structure is intact, the organ and windows are much less damaged than originally feared, and most of the art has been saved. And even if President Macron's idea of restoring the Cathedral within five years seems over-ambitious, it seems that Notre Dame will be restored to much of its former glory.

I was reflecting that all this has happened in the holiest week of the Christian year, just a few days before Good Friday and Easter Day. And it occurred to me that perhaps out of this calamity we might be reminded of the great message of this week.

A great cathedral struck down: an apparent disaster. But now there is new hope that the cathedral will be restored to its true glory.....A great teacher and healer struck down and executed: surely a terrible disaster. But despite all this there is new hope.

On that first Good Friday it seemed that all hope was gone. Jesus, the teacher in whom the disciples had placed their trust, the great teacher and healer, the one who had revealed himself to them as the Messiah, had been cruelly executed. It was all over. Three years of the disciples' lives wasted on a good man, a great man, but in the end, a man who was destroyed by the system.

I wonder whether any of Jesus' followers remembered how he had warned them that this would happen. He had said that he would be tried and executed by his enemies. I wonder whether any of his followers remembered how he had also told them that after this he would be raised from death on the third day. He had told them all this a number of times, but it hadn't made sense to them and they had never really taken it in.

On that Sunday morning very early, some of the women including Mary Magdalene go off to the tomb to give honour to the body of Jesus. And a series of unexpected things happen. The stone is already rolled away; the tomb is empty except for the grave clothes neatly arranged. Then the women start claiming to have seen angels telling them that Jesus has risen from death.

And then Mary meets the gardener and asks him if he knows where Jesus is. But it is not the gardener: it is Jesus himself! Jesus has indeed risen from death. When Mary tells the others that she has seen Jesus, she meets with an understandable scepticism. But by the end of the day, many of the disciples have seen the risen Jesus, and discovered for themselves that Jesus has indeed risen from the dead.

I wonder what they expected to happen next. Would Jesus now raise an army and attack the Roman invaders as many had expected him to do before? Would they start wandering around the country with Jesus once again? Would the story continue as before, and would Jesus this time take a bit more care not to annoy people in power?

No: the story was not just going to just continue. It would be a new story. That's why Mary was told she could not keep holding on to the risen Jesus. The disciples would have a new relationship with Jesus. But they would also have a new purpose and a new hope.

Jesus' resurrection would point the way to their new direction in life and their new hope. In fact, Jesus' resurrection points the way for us too. Our purpose and our hope are bound up with the risen Jesus.

As Paul points out in our reading from 1 Corinthians 15, Jesus' resurrection is right at the heart of Christian faith. It is not an optional extra. Jesus' resurrection points to our resurrection.

You may remember that we looked at most of this chapter of 1 Corinthians a couple of months ago. This morning we heard a part of the chapter that was actually omitted from those readings. These verses fit particularly well on this Easter Day.

“Christ has been raised from the dead”, says Paul, “the first fruits of those who have died.” The first fruits of the crop pointed to the great harvest to come. In the same way the resurrection of Jesus points to the great harvest of new life for all God’s people. Jesus’ resurrection points to our resurrection.

To many people, when you die, that’s the end. That’s all there is. But the resurrection of Jesus assures us that this life is not all there is, and that the world as we know it is not all there is. This world is a bit of a mixture: so much that is good, for it is God’s creation, but so much that is wrong because human sin has had its impact. There is much evil, as we are reminded in the news every day. There is pain and injustice and suffering, and there is death – the last enemy.

But the resurrection of Jesus assures us that death itself has been overcome, and its final destruction will come in God’s time. This world will be transformed into a new creation where evil and death are no more. Our hope as we trust in Christ, who brings us forgiveness, who makes us God’s friends, God’s people, is that we will share in the eternal glorious kingdom of God, that kingdom of light and life and perfect love. Right now, of course, we can only begin to take in the blessings God has for his people. But through the risen Christ, we are assured of their wonder and their reality.

Adam, the first man, sinned – setting the pattern for all human beings. Adam’s story is our story. He was a sinner, and death came to him, as it comes to all sinners.

Jesus, the second Adam, took human sin on himself, and died for us. Jesus has set a new pattern: his story will in certain ways become our story. His resurrection points to our resurrection.

We are people of hope. We haven’t yet seen the glory that awaits us in God’s new creation. Human death awaits us - unless Jesus returns during our time on earth. But resurrection and glory in our wonderful eternal home awaits us through Christ.

If Christianity was just a story about a special man, it would be a waste of time to take it too seriously. If Christianity was just a call to try to be kind loving people, it would be something, but most of us would make a mess of it.

But Christian faith is about the Son of God who lived; who showed and taught us how to live; who died to bring us forgiveness and reconciliation with God; who rose from death to bring us new life and eternal hope; and who leads us through life to live as his people, preparing for that great day when we shall see him as he is in all his glory, and he shall welcome us into the fullness of his eternal kingdom. We trust in the One who truly died and rose again, and who brings us eternal hope.

Christ is risen. He is risen indeed! Amen.

Paul Weaver