**Sunday 16th April 2023 Easter 2**

**Acts 2: 14a & 22-32 & John 20:19-31**

**An idle tale?**

**Rev David Coster**

I am not sure just how many funerals I have officiated at during the forty-six plus years since my Ordination in the Awatere Parish in Marlborough. I suspect that it must be between 500 and 800. I could go back and count for I have the Officiant’s record, provided by the Funeral Director, for all of them. At each of those Services at the committal I have said words similar to these ones:

We have entrusted Jean to God’s merciful keeping.

We now commit her body to be cremated,

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust,

In the sure and certain hope

Of the resurrection to eternal life, through our Lord Jesus Christ,

Who died, was buried,

and rose again for us,

and is alive and reigns for evermore. Amen

That committal is from the most recently published Service Book of the Church of Scotland, but it doesn’t matter which committal service I use, the Service contains the words, “in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life.”

Why are these words used? Simply because the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the foundation of the Christian hope, for in him God has shown what he intends to do for all his people.

In Acts 2 Peter’s point, made to the assembled crowd, was simple: Jesus the one who was crucified, is risen – for death could not hold him.

To those being addressed, however, Peter’s message (and the grand authority with which it was delivered) must have seemed strange to the point of delusion. Is it the reaction of a grief-stricken man whose hope for the future has been lost?

The crucifixion of Jesus is an undeniable fact of history, attested to in many reliable historical sources. But the resurrection of Jesus is a different matter. Belief in the resurrection is dependent on the testimony of witnesses. Do we believe the witnesses or don’t we?

The two great Christian festivals or celebrations are Christmas and Easter. One is celebrated with the giving of gifts (as did the Wise men to Jesus at the time of his birth) and the other with the giving of Easter eggs or Easter rabbits to celebrate new life. Both celebrations tend also to be associated with holidays and the eating of copious amounts of food. Socially both festivals add greatly to heightened economic activity and thus have significance for our society.

It was not Christmas, but Easter and the events surrounding the death and resurrection of Jesus that had the greatest significance for the faith and motivation of the first disciples. Neither Mark nor John mentions the birth narratives of Jesus, only Matthew and Luke mention them. But all writers in the New Testament, whether Gospel or Epistles (Letters) place great stress upon the death and resurrection of Jesus from the dead as the foundation of the faith. They all affirm the life and presence of the risen Christ among them, however difficult their circumstances.

If we struggle with the truth of the resurrection of Jesus, we are not alone.

It is to John’s credit that he has the episode of the “doubting Thomas” in his Gospel. Thomas gets a hard time in the Christian consciousness. Where other disciples were constantly failing to ‘get it’ and made frequent mistakes and showed lack of belief in Jesus and his teaching, it is Thomas who is left with the moniker ‘Doubting Thomas.’

Thomas is adamant that he will not believe the testament of his fellow disciples unless he sees with his own eyes the physical scars from the crucifixion on Jesus’ body and places his hand in them.

Rather than being bold, brave and on fire with the Gospel hope, after the crucifixion of Jesus, the disciples cower behind locked doors, frightened and afraid. They are a dejected group. They have failed their prophet, their teacher, their leader, their friend.

The disciples might have expected anger, rebuke and disappointment from the Risen Jesus. But he didn’t do any such thing. He understood them and forgave them. He simply said, “Peace be with you.” – the ultimate sign of reconciliation – Jesus’ peace.

I have never seen a ghost. Many people assert most strongly that they have seen ghosts. My mother was one of those people. Even though she was quite young when she saw the ghost enter her bedroom where she was sleeping with her sisters, in her old age she could still, in great detail, describe what she saw with her own eyes and describe her fear as she tried to wake her sisters.

I used to doubt my mother’s witness putting it down to a bad dream. She assured me that she was wide awake and got quite annoyed with me for doubting her. The older I become the more open I become to my mother’s witness. Whatever took place for Mum, I did not experience it or witness it, but she did. Why should I doubt her because her experience has not been my experience?

Our reading from John’s Gospel for today is a little like Mum’s ghost story. How can we believe what we have not experienced? Surely this is stuff to make us roll our eyes with incredulity. Maybe but also maybe no!

Jesus’ sudden appearance within a locked room becomes more than a special effect thrown in to add awe to a movie scene. Jesus’ entry signals (is a sign) of God’s impressive power – a sign of a God who doesn’t waste power on empty miracles.

In this passage Jesus breaks and enters – and not just into a locked room. Jesus breaks the chains of fear and shame that bind his friends and enters their hearts and minds setting them free to be the people God desires them to be.

Jesus breathes on them. As they inhale the gift of the Holy Spirit, the disciples experience release from their cage of fear and the bonds of shame. As they are forgiven they discover new life – a resurrected life. They become empowered to follow Jesus proclaiming that he who was crucified is now raised.

Belief, or faith, is an important matter in John’s Gospel. In fact John says that he has written his entire Gospel that people will believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and in the act of believing, have real and eternal life in the way he personally revealed it.

John Polkinghorne, one of Britain’s leading theoretical physicists, contends that Christianity, like the natural sciences, is concerned with making sense of the world on the basis of available evidence. “Faith,” he says is not a question of shutting one’s eyes, gritting one’s teeth and believing the impossible. It involves a leap, but a leap into the light rather than the dark.” In other words, faith is to be understood as “motivated belief, based on evidence.”

That is how it was for the first disciples when they came to faith in Jesus as Christ, the Risen Lord. In the Gospels they conveyed their experience that others, people like us, may also have faith in Jesus as Christ, the Risen Lord.

To God be the glory. Amen.