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SERMONS FOR THE CHRISTIAN YEAR

THE TEXTS ARE TAKEN FROM THE *REVISED COMMON LECTIONARY*
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7th April – Easter 2

EASTER TESTIMONY

*By the Revd Dr Stephen B. Davies, MA,
Truro, Cornwall*

John 20:19–31

‘Christ is risen!’
‘He is risen indeed!’
‘Hallelujah’

That ringing Easter acclamation echoes round our churches each Sunday of the Easter season every year. But what does Easter mean? What is it all really about? What difference does it make? Even as we sing our Easter hymns and proclaim our Easter Faith these kinds of questions are there, lurking underneath and usually unsaid, but there none the less. And they always have been, even from the very beginnings at that first Easter. They are not new. Neither are they wrong, bad or faithless; for the resurrection of Jesus Christ is too important a creed to be believed just because Christians are supposed to believe it.

‘He is risen!’ That’s what Mary Magdalene rushes to report to the disciples. In the way John tells his Easter story, she had met her risen Lord at dawn in the garden. Peter and another disciple had been there with her, but they had gone and they hadn’t seen him. What they and the rest made of Mary’s breathless news we are not told. But here in the first of the three scenes in today’s Gospel reading, the doors of their Upper Room are still locked, and they are still afraid of the Jewish authorities. That much we are told. Then, that night, so John tells his story, Jesus comes to them even though the doors are locked, and he greets them with the conventional, ‘Peace be with you’, which must have sounded like they’d never heard it sound before. He shows himself to them, drawing their attention to his pierced hands and side. They are glad, overjoyed, delighted – just as Jesus had said they would be half a dozen times in as many minutes as he talked to them at the Last Supper.

They would be hurt, bereft, confused, he had said, but then they would be glad, overjoyed, delighted. He blesses them, repeating what he has already said, ‘Peace be with you’. He commissions them, ‘As the Father has sent me, so I send you’. He blesses them again, by breathing on them and saying ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’, a quiet, gentle, life-giving breath of a blessing. Then he gives them authority to forgive or to retain sins – make of that what you may – and there the visit ends.

There it is, the familiar, bold Easter story, or at least there is John’s version of it, as different from Luke’s as Luke’s is from Matthew’s. ‘Lo, Jesus meets them, risen from the tomb; lovingly he greets them, scatters fear and gloom’, as the hymn nearly says. ‘He is risen!’ – Mary had said; ‘He is risen indeed’ – the disciples now affirm. But, and there seems to be a ‘but’ of some kind in every one of the Easter stories, but Thomas is not there. And when he comes back and they tell him what has happened he will have none of it. Nonsense, he says, it doesn’t make sense. He voices those lurking questions. And he’s right. It doesn’t. It is unbelievable. Thomas can’t and won’t believe it.

So to the second scene. Eight days later. Same place. Same locked doors. But this time Thomas is there. Jesus comes to them again and greets them again. Then he shows himself to Thomas, drawing his attention to his pierced hands and side, inviting him to touch, feel, believe. Thomas doesn’t touch but he does believe. Nowhere in any of the Gospels do we find any greater statement of faith than this one uttered by Thomas, ‘My Lord and my God’. He sees and believes. ‘Blessed are those’, he is told, ‘who haven’t seen and yet believe.’ Thomas doesn’t reply. That’s the end of the scene. ‘Christ is risen; he is risen indeed’, affirms Thomas as he declares his faith in Jesus as his Lord and his God, a faith based on that experience of meeting the Risen Lord. Thomas is a changed man after the resurrection. The disciples are changed too, into apostles. The Jewish faith is

changed, a new sect emerges. The world is changed, a new world religion grows out of that little Jewish sect.

There are many unanswered and unanswerable questions about the resurrection of Jesus and the first Easter: What happened in the tomb? – the Bible is silent. Who first discovered the empty tomb? – the Bible gives three different combinations of women. What was the risen body of Jesus like? – parts of the Bible say it was as real a body as ours, others say it could come and go through locked doors, appear and disappear in ways our bodies can't. In what order did the appearances take place? – it is impossible to put the Bible stories into diary order. Why do so many of the stories say that the disciples doubted? – why indeed. And so we could go on, just about the Easter stories themselves, but there is that one huge fact to be reckoned with, that huge change, the beginning of the Christian Church. And that fact needs to be explained. The only explanation big enough to fit the fact, our reading asserts, is that Christ met his disciples again after his death, that he was raised and is risen, and that changed things.

Then we come to the third part of our reading, the last two verses of John 20; and they read like an author's concluding note. They tell us why he has written what he has written – and why John's Easter story carries on for another chapter after it is another of those Bible questions without answers. But what it says is plain enough. John tells his readers that he has written what he has written because he, like Thomas, believes in Jesus as Messiah – Son of God – Lord and that he has found new life in this new faith with Jesus at its centre, that he too has been changed by meeting Jesus. That's why he hasn't written a biography of Jesus, he says, but a work of testimony, written by a believer that others might come to believe as well, written out of a lifetime's experience of believing and of working out what this means in all the chances and changes of daily life. He knows that his readers have not seen what Thomas and the others have seen – in all probability this John who wrote the Fourth Gospel hadn't seen it either – but have they seen enough in this testimony to find in it the clue to a new way of living, a new experience of life, as he had? Has he written it compellingly enough, that they will see that the resurrection of Jesus is the greatest life-giving and life-enhancing sign of all? That is his aim and hope in writing his Gospel. He is convinced that the story of Jesus is the key to

the meaning of life, the universe and everything, and he tells us his story with its Easter ending to invite us to join him in living by it, in making it our story too.

May God help us to hear John's testimony and to respond.

14th April – Easter 3

BELIEF IN THE RESURRECTION

*By the Revd Dr T. Mervyn Willsshaw,
Lichfield, Staffordshire*

Luke 24:13–35

The evidence for the resurrection of Jesus is both weaker and stronger than may often be supposed. It is weak to the extent that it rests upon hearsay, imagination and trust. It is strong in its congruence with ordinary experience.

Of course, such statements need some justification but, first, we need to be sure what we mean by resurrection. The Gospel stories are about an empty tomb and Jesus being seen alive again a few days after his death. But they don't proclaim a mere resuscitation. There is both continuity and discontinuity between Jesus of Nazareth and the risen Christ. The disciples know their risen Lord when they see him but not immediately. He shares a meal with them but mysteriously vanishes from sight. He bears the nail prints but walks through closed doors. He is the crucified returned but not to a second death. The Jesus these men knew has been raised to a new quality of life. It is God's doing and the process is not complete until Jesus is taken to be with the Father. Resurrection and ascension belong together – a fact which John makes clearer than Luke. The resurrection is an unseen event, not merely because no one was around when the stone was moved from the mouth of the tomb but because, by its very nature, it is a heavenly, divine action.

How on earth did the early Christians come to believe something so stupendous? How can we be expected to accept it now? This story offers some answers.

I

When the two disciples express disappointment at the way things have turned out, Jesus points them to the Biblical witness. It is here that we too must begin. But how convincing is it?

The earliest testimony to the resurrection is found in Paul's writings, notably 1 Corinthians 15, where he offers an impressive list of those who witnessed the appearances of the risen Christ. Amongst them he includes himself. He makes no mention of an empty tomb.

The Gospel accounts speak of both an empty tomb and appearances but there are big differences between them. We cannot avoid the conclusion that theological and contextual considerations have shaped their narratives and made it impossible for us to be sure what happened.

But the Biblical witness is not confined to the Gospels or even to the New Testament. Jesus, says Luke, took the Jewish Bible and revealed its testimony to the resurrection. It would have been good to hear what he said. For the Old Testament contains little, if any, clear reference to resurrection. There are hints here and there but we can never be sure that Christian hindsight is not making us read more into them than the writers intended. Yet while the Old Testament witness may not be found in proof texts, it is implied in the whole thrust of its message.

The God of the Old Testament is one who creates new life and hope in situations of death and despair. The classic examples are the slavery and subsequent exodus and exile and subsequent restoration – the two great formative experiences for Israel. The New Testament suggests that the death and resurrection of Jesus constitute a third such revelatory and saving event. This is how God acts.

At the very least the Biblical witness confronts us with the idea. It puts it into our minds as a possibility, though it may not be enough to convince us of its reality. Even the exposition Jesus gave was apparently insufficient to enable the two disciples to recognize him.

II

The crucial evidence for them had to do with the meal they shared with Jesus. It is difficult not to see a eucharistic reference here. It was as Jesus took bread, blessed, broke and gave it that they recognized him. In these actions he revealed himself as the risen Christ. The Christian claim is that he still does.

John Robinson, when he was Bishop of Woolwich, told a story about celebrating holy communion in a little whitewashed Lutheran church near Oberammergau on the morning of the passion play. The play, he said, was wonderful – beautifully,

dramatically, and reverently presented. It made an enormous impression. But it did not compare with the earlier eucharist. In the play Jesus was remembered. In the communion service, he was encountered. However they may conceive it, most Christians believe that Jesus is really present in this sacrament. He is the host and we gather with him at his table.

Moreover, because the risen Christ is known in the ordinary stuff of bread and wine the service is an invitation to recognize his presence in the whole of life. The disciples knew him as he sat at their table and broke the bread because they had seen him do the same in the community meals of the disciples and, perhaps, at the Last Supper.

The eucharist reminds us of, and points us to, the all-pervading presence of the risen Christ and the understanding of life that is proclaimed in the resurrection.

III

The question remains as to whether the leap of faith to which we are invited by both Bible and eucharist finds any justification in everyday experience. The disciples came to resurrection faith when, at last, their tradition, the life of the Jesus community and ordinary life came together to make sense.

It is a huge question that cannot be adequately treated the space of a short sermon. But while some questions will inevitably be begged, we must attempt a brief answer.

Resurrection faith is about God raising up Jesus to be with him. Paul goes so far as to say that he was 'proclaimed Son of God by an act of power that raised him from the dead' (Rom. 1:4 REB). In his brief ministry Jesus had embodied the gracious rule of God through teaching, healing and self-giving. He had exposed the dehumanizing effects of much contemporary religion and valued persons above precepts. He accepted the inevitability of suffering and went to the cross rather than forsaking or rejecting his people.

The resurrection message is that, for all this, God set his stamp of approval on Jesus. He declared him to be a man after his own heart. The resurrection is not the reversal of the cross so much as the affirmation that, on the cross, the nature of God himself is laid bare and the truth underlying the universe is revealed. It proclaims the grace that brought creation to birth; which sustains it, explains

it and ever strives to draw it towards the fulfilment of its potentiality.

That grace is all around us, often unrecognized for what it is. It is vulnerable and never irresistible but it has a tenacious patience and an infinite persistence that nothing and nobody can destroy. It is the lubricant that makes the world's life possible. It breaks the chain reaction of evil and violence and restores peace. It opens up deadlocked situations and creates fresh possibilities.

The Biblical witness and the Church's worship point us to it. They receive their confirmation when we recognize it and, even more, when we dare to live by it.

21st April – Easter 4

THE GRIEVING SHEPHERD

*By the Revd David R. Wood, MA, MPhil,
Birmingham*

Psalm 23; John 10:1-10

George wept. He had spent a life-time building up his prize flock of Swaledale sheep. Morning and night, summer and winter, the round of lambing and shearing, the anxious work of healing and rescue. The cups and rosettes modestly displayed in the farmhouse kitchen spoke volumes of his labour of love. And then . . . foot and mouth, the men from the ministry, the vets, the smoke and stench as the whole flock was slaughtered. And George wept. And in the despair, anguish and pain etched deep in the lines of his face, one saw deeply into the very face of God.

My father's advice to all aspiring preachers was: 'preach on the great themes, preach on the great texts'. Psalm 23 is a great text, yet she is like a distant, but loved relative. We rarely visit her, yet she turns up at weddings and funerals, and comes to stay after Easter. We are glad to see her, for she always brings a word of hope and comfort. And she encourages us to celebrate, to celebrate the faithfulness, generosity and overflowing goodness of God, the good shepherd and the liberal host.

Yet she understands a strange mystery in life, namely that it's when in the valley of shadows that we need to celebrate all the more. The world lives in the shadow of death. Any minister viewing her flock from the pulpit knows that all there are touched by

the pain and breakage of life. Any human being sensitive to the world feels the sorrow, frustration and anger of its peoples. It is precisely in these shadows that we need to celebrate God. Houda was a Lebanese Christian who had experienced the horrors of life in Beirut. When asked how she and her church survived, she replied: 'we simply rehearsed the faith and sang God's story'. That's what Psalm 23 does. In the valley of the shadow, it invites us to rehearse our faith and sing God's story. When the shadows would overwhelm us, telling God's story reminds us of other realities, reminds us that 'sin and death and hell shall never o'er us final triumph gain'. There is something very subversive about praise!

However, it was George who helped me see to the heart of that story – his face that mirrored the suffering, vulnerability and grief of God. Where is God in the shadows? There, beside us – his rod and staff . . . even in his absence, still present. The opening chapters of Genesis are tremendous, for they deal with so many human issues. They tell of a God who, in love, began the risky business of creation and who invited humanity to be a partner in her firm: the project – to work for the blessing and flourishing of all creation. They also tell of a God who, when humanity put the whole project in jeopardy, had three choices: to pull the plug (the flood!), to intervene in power and like all good parents 'make it better' (what many would like God to do!) or to seek the remedy by entering into the hurt of creation and through costly suffering lead it from death to resurrection. The eternally wounded Christ is the symbol of the path he chose. Love means suffering. If God is a God of love, then he is also a suffering God. If it's a choice between a theology of glory or a theology of the cross, I'm for the theology of the cross. What we discover in Christ is God, the grieving shepherd, who journeys with us through despair to hope, through death to resurrection. Only those who have been to the cross know the true nature of glory.

Life with Peter, our child with profound and multiple learning difficulties, has been 'interesting'! Talking to a group of students about him, one asked if I had ever been angry with God. Some parents of such children do get angry, rightly. As for me, many questions, many frustrations, much sadness and joy, much arguing with God and much prayer – yet through it all a deep sense of God's grieving and enabling presence. But more than that – a growing

discovery of life's meaning and what really matters, a recognition of Peter's ministry to us and others (even though he did not choose it), and supremely a sure, simple knowledge of Peter held in God's embrace. From death to resurrection?

Finally, let's be honest. This is not true for all. Some are utterly broken and destroyed in the shadows. It's not through lack of faith nor because they are worse sinners than the rest of us. But it happens. There is a deep mystery here: how does such experience square with our neatly-packaged theology? We need to pray for such folk and be alongside them. Wisely, the Book of Psalms contains prayers of lament as well as songs of confidence. Sometimes we need to lament and wrestle. The name Israel means 'one who strives with God'. The people of God in every age, Jacob-like, should strive and struggle with God, to understand his ways and discern his mysteries. We are promised that we shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Thank God! Perhaps there all will be revealed. As for George ... he's on the road to new things!

28th April – Easter 5

I AM THE WAY THE TRUTH AND THE LIFE

*By David G. Kibble, RD, BD, FCoT, MIMgt,
Leeds*

John 14:1-14

I recently went to stay with some friends who live in London. Because I was travelling by train they told me how to get to their flat from their nearest tube station – Hammersmith. The directions involved crossing Hammersmith Bridge; once I got to the bridge I knew my way easily. The problem for me was getting from the tube station to the bridge. Despite their instructions I got lost and had to ask the way. When you have to ask someone the way the assumption is that you have to go somewhere once they have given you directions. In my own case I had to go down one street and then turn left: from there I could see the bridge. When I asked my question, 'Can you tell me the way to Hammersmith Bridge?' I assumed that I would have to walk somewhere.

When we ask the question 'How do I get to God?' we find that we are right there when we look at Jesus.

We don't have to go any further. We are there. It's a bit like a foreign tourist asking where Big Ben is when he or she is standing right under it. There is no journey to make: you are there. When we look at Jesus we don't have to go any further. When Jesus says, 'I am the way', we're there. The way to God is via a relationship with Jesus Christ. It's via Jesus that we get to the Father.

You will all be familiar with children's puzzles which give three or four different routes, but only one of which leads to the treasure. Over the years people have suggested that there are various ways of getting to God. Some have suggested that by doing good we get to God. Other have suggested that the way to God is through religious rituals. Some people would suggest that if we really want to find God we should go away from people and find him in solitude. Visiting Lindisfarne recently, I saw a small island where one of the monks used to go on retreat away from the monastic community to be alone with God in a little hut. Others suggest that we will find God through meditation whilst others suggest that we will find God through our 'inner self'. All of these may get us close to God and they might help us in our relationship with him once we have met him. But in the first instance Jesus is the way to God. Other routes may lead us 'up the mountain', but only by going to and through Jesus do we get to the top. We only meet the Father through the Son.

Why is it that only Jesus is the way to God? To answer this we might do a bit of theology! The book of Hebrews describes Jesus as our high priest. Looking at the idea of the Jewish high priest can help us to see why Jesus is the way. The Old Testament high priest represented the Jewish people before God; as their representative he gained forgiveness for them. And on one day each year he went into the holy of holies where he entered God's special presence. Again, this he did on behalf of the Jewish nation. When he carried out his priestly work he wore a breastplate, a breastplate which had on it twelve precious stones. Each stone represented one of the tribes of Israel. Wearing the breastplate symbolized how when he went into the presence of God he went on behalf of the Jewish people. He represented the people before God and gained forgiveness on their behalf.

When Jesus came, the book of Hebrews tells us that in a similar way he represented all of us. By dying and rising from the dead he gained forgiveness

for us. And by going into the Father's presence he gained for us the possibility of a relationship with the Father. When Jesus gains forgiveness, when he conquers death, when he goes into the presence of the Father, we all do. He did these things on our behalf. That is why Jesus is the way. He is the way because only he can act as our high priest.

We all know about scientific discoveries. We know that at one time people thought that the earth was flat: then it was discovered that it was round. At one time people thought that the earth was at the centre of the universe: then scientists discovered that the sun was at the centre. There have been various theories about how the universe will end. We have had the idea of an imploding universe: the idea was that the universe would, after expanding, contract, fall in on itself and implode into nothingness. Then we had the pulsating universe theory which suggested that after the big crunch there would be another big bang and so on. More recently scientists have discovered that the universe is actually expanding at an increasing rate: the edges of the universe are actually moving outward at an ever-increasing speed. Science always looks to solve the puzzles of the universe and search for truth.

We know that God created the universe. He knows everything about the universe because he

created it in the first place. He knows what scientists have yet to discover. In a very real sense, therefore, he is the truth. He is the origin of and the meaning of the universe. God is the truth. As the Son of God Jesus is the truth.

Jesus said that he is the life. Because he is God himself (the truth), because he is our high priest (the way) he is also the life. Real life is a life lived in Jesus. A real life, a life that is lived at one with God, is one in which we can know that we are forgiven. It is one in which we can have a relationship with God – in which we can know him as our Father. It is one in which we can worship God – the creator of the universe and one in which we can know a purpose in life. It is one in which at the end we will go forward to live an eternal life in God's presence. It is because of and through Jesus that we can have a real life as God wants us to live it. Jesus is therefore the life.

Jesus is part of God himself – as such he is the truth. He mirrors and reflects what life in the universe is all about. Jesus is the way because as our high priest he takes us into the presence of the Father. Jesus is the life because it is only in and through him that we can live a life in which we can have a relationship with our heavenly Father – the creator of the universe and the origin of real love.

The Day the World Changed



By THE EDITOR

The tragic events of 11 September 2001 will live in infamy. In this Journal, we are prevented from immediate contemporary comment by the fact that the text is prepared months in advance, but preachers rightly feel obliged to speak to the situation that confronts them. In a little booklet, *The Day the World Changed* (London/Sydney/Auckland: Hodder & Stoughton, 2001. Pb. £2.99. 65 pp. ISBN 0-340-78711-2), R. T. Kendall records his response in a sermon immediately after the tragedy. He addresses the question, 'How should Christians respond?' I'm inclined to say, 'How should *anyone* respond' to such events? I'm not in full agreement with the notion that 'the world changed' that day; rather, that our eyes were opened to the kind of world we live in. Nor do I like the metaphor 'war against terrorism'. War is declared between nations; the metaphor might confuse rather than clarify. R. T. Kendall's sermon is a profound sincere response to the situation from a conservative Christian standpoint. I would be more hesitant to make such direct inferences from the Book of Revelation, at least without further exploration of the text, but the general tenor of his reflections, including his call for 'a new kind of hero', is helpful. In fact, we saw much heroism among the ruins; Christians must not claim a monopoly. Heroism is self-giving when faced with the claim of the other – in whatever form the 'other' comes. We see it on the Cross. Easter celebrates the powerful dynamic of Hope signalled in the Resurrection.