

## Easter 2008 - Rothbury 10.15 am

The Resurrection and Easter are the most important part of our Christian faith. I am not about to try and prove it happened, or tell you how it happened. As far as I am concerned, these are the facts - yes facts, not beliefs. Jesus was a man. He was tortured and put to death. He died and then was stabbed up into his heart by a lance. He was sealed in a tomb. He rose from the dead and was seen by many people. And Jesus came from God to show us God as a God of love. This we learn from the Bible.

The four Gospels in the Bible are not the **only** accounts of the resurrection. There is a gospel of Peter which gives some more snippets of information.

This late first century book says this:

And then they pulled the nails from the hands of the Lord and laid him on the ground. And the whole earth was shaken, and there came a great fear on all. Then the sun came out, and it was found to be the ninth hour. Now the Jews rejoiced, and gave his body unto Joseph to bury it, because he had beheld the good things which he did. And Joseph took the Lord and washed him and wrapped him in linen and brought him unto his own tomb, which is called the "Joseph's Garden."

We shall return to Joseph's garden in a moment.

You remember that the chief priests wanted Pilate to make sure that no one stole Jesus' body away. Peter's gospel says;

All who were there with the soldiers rolled a great stone to the entrance of the tomb and plastered seven seals on it. Then they pitched a tent there and kept watch.

The stone moved away by itself, and angels came and brought Jesus out. And they heard a voice out of the heavens saying, "Have you preached unto them that sleep?" The answer that was heard was, "Yes!"

Those men took counsel with each other and thought to go and report these things to Pilate. Pilate ordered the centurion and the soldiers that they should say nothing.

The last quotation I will share with you is this:

And they went and found the tomb open. They drew near to it and looked in and saw a young man sitting in the middle of the tomb; He had a fair countenance and was clad in very bright raiment. He said unto them, "Why are you here? Who do you seek? You're not looking for the one that was crucified? He is risen and is gone. If you don't believe it, look in and see the place where he was laid down, for he is not there. For he has risen and is gone to the place that he had come from." Then the women fled in fear."

The fragment of the gospel finishes just a verse later.

The women fled in fear, but Mary came back. It was Mary who had the honour to be the first to meet the risen Jesus. But she didn't know him. Her eyes all red and puffy with weeping. Perhaps the low early morning sun behind Jesus dazzled her too, so all she could see was a shape with lots of bright rainbows. And she naturally took him for the gardener. After all, this was Joseph's garden, and the early morning, was the time to be tidying up, sweeping the paths. Who else would be there at that hour, among the dead?

From her earlier visit she knew Jesus wasn't there, but still she stayed. It was perhaps not a surprise that the body was missing. We know from other historical sources that grave - robbing was a fairly common crime and the Romans had been forced to publish a special law against it. But the garden was quiet, and empty. And it was the last place her Lord had been. And she would have believed that Jesus' spirit would have still been near the body for three days.

She loved Jesus more than anything. He had rescued her. She had been ill, despised, an outcast, a woman with no friends, stared and pointed at in the street, living on the edge. Jesus had drawn her into his circle of friends, his new community, where people who were nothing were valued as his friends and as important people in their own right. She had learned of the new world where God reigned, where all the rules and regulations that had so ground down her and all those like her were overturned. Jesus spoke so beautifully of God's Kingdom where the poor were rich and the humble exalted, where the sick found healing and the tormented found peace, where even death could be challenged.

But then **they** had come for him, as the powerful do for those who stand up to them. They tortured him, crucified him, killed him. Her lovely Lord. And now he had gone, leaving behind this empty space, this nothingness.

As she sat rocking to and fro, hugging herself in her sorrow, tears pouring down, she tried to get things together in her head. The most important thing was that He had loved her, and, once you have been loved, the world is different for ever. She had a job to do, she knew. There was his mother to console. There were his friends to support while they decided what to do now. And then there was a future to find, a way of hanging on to it all. The new world of God's reign was too precious to lose.

The gardener was nearer now, breaking into her thoughts. Disturbing her peace. Suddenly she was angry, that someone had taken the body away, denying her a last look, a quiet goodbye. Roman soldiers perhaps? The religious authorities? Misguided disciples? The gardener might know. She almost screamed: "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."

But then, through her weeping she heard just one word: "Mary". Was she imagining it, as people do when they think that someone who is dead is with them? No, she knew the voice, even through her tears, she knew him. Not the gardener - of course not. It was the Lord. She tried to grab him. To hold on to him and never let him out of her sight. But Jesus says "No". He has to go to his father. "Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" And so to Mary falls the honour of being the first apostle - the first bearer of the good news of the resurrection.

Why do we still think it is good news now? Of course it was *then*, because they knew and loved Jesus. But now?

Simply this real resurrection, seen by so many different people, and at different times is too remarkable a story to be a put-up job. It was a real resurrection because he could be touched, and seen and he ate with the disciples twice. This real resurrection is proof to me and to you that God's love goes on after death - and that you and I can be raised up with Jesus after we die. Raised into God's marvellous kingdom.

To mistake Jesus for a gardener is a very interesting error. Did not Jesus talk about seeds falling into the ground and dying, so that more fruit would appear. In the death and resurrection of Jesus there is new life, eternal life, for those who are willing to take it. Love has proved stronger than hate, life stronger than death.

The resurrection changes lives - All we need is faith - just faith. Step onto the bridge - it will carry you across to glory. And all we need to do is to accept that all this happened for you, and for me.