

Hymns: **298** **Christ the Lord is risen today**
 314 **This joyful Eastertide**
 591 **Let all mortal flesh keep silence**
 313 **Thine be the glory, risen, conquering Son**

Readings: **Luke 24:1-12**

***“Some idle tale!
A tale told by an idiot!”***

We have welcomed 15 people through baptism, confirmation, or transfer into the fellowship of this congregation. That takes our total membership to 439. I mention this because, less than 40 years ago, the sum total of all our members was a paltry 25 – just a handful more than those we’ve just welcomed. So, on the day we rejoice at the resurrection of our Lord, we can also take courage from the resurrection of the resurrection of the church and, just as we thank God for all that is past, so too we must learn to trust him for all that’s to come. To him be the glory.

Jennifer and I have just completed a series of talks on Leslie Weatherhead’s last book “The Christian Agnostic”. It’s an amazingly frank book in which the author tries to disentangle parts of the biblical narrative which he finds it hard to believe in from the core values, the pillars of our faith, the fundamental truths that he considers essential to Christian belief. So he admits that he finds the Virgin Birth, some of the miracles reportedly performed by Christ, a personal doctrine of the Holy Spirit, very difficult to swallow. So I found it very interesting that this self-confessed “agnostic” was a whole-hearted believer in the resurrection. Listen to his case. “How can we account for the fact,” he asks pointedly,

- “that eleven men in hiding, terrible disappointed and disillusioned, suddenly became missionaries who, within six or seven weeks of the death of their Lord, were preaching his resurrection in the very area where he’d been done to death?”
- “God raised him from the dead”, - how is it that St Peter, preaching within a short time of the crucifixion and within a mile or so of where it took place, used this as his text? And that he added “of that we are witnesses”. If this were not so, why in heaven’s name didn’t someone come forward and say, “don’t be silly. I can show you his body.”
- “It is inconceivable that with no significant lapse of time the disciples could have got away with a lie and then proceed to die for its truth.”

Weatherhead continues in this vein for several pages. And from this morning’s scripture, we can add our own observation that the disciples themselves instinctively dismissed the account given them by the women – rubbish, an old wives’ tale, an idle tale. They were perfect examples of what it means to be a Christian agnostic. Somehow, we must position ourselves on this question. Do we believe and accept it

as true? Or is it for us too a tale told by idiots, full of sound and fury, signifying not much more than nothing?

Like Weatherhead, I cannot deny the weight of evidence that indicates the fact of the resurrection. I'm totally convinced that it happened. I'm content to remain reverently silent on just how it all came about. It is so easy to belittle the enormity of what happened by endless speculation about how it might have taken place. As Weatherhead concludes, if the resurrection had not taken place, not a single page of the New Testament would have been written. And that's good enough for me.

If you stand with me, fully convinced of the fact of the resurrection but humbly and happily agnostic about the manner of the by which it was achieved, then you might like to come with me on the next step of the journey opened out by your readiness to accept this beginning.

We should hope that the triumph of life over death and love, such pure and unconditional love, over everything that demeans the human spirit, might somehow infuse us, get into our blood stream, so that our daily lives might reflect that unquenchable and unfathomable love. And we should perhaps realise this victory both personally and (with others of goodwill) corporately too.

Let's start at the personal level. I'm always proud to announce that, for a short time towards the end of her life, Mya Angelou and I were friends. I want her to be our guide now as we move forward with this question. Again and again in her personal and domestic life, and also as a black woman living in the segregated south of the USA, she had to struggle for survival, for self-respect, for her dignity in the eyes of others. It's not surprising that this woman of faith should choose the metaphor of "rising up" to convey her determination. Just listen to part of her poem "I rise".

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may tread me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise.

You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I'll rise.

Out of the huts of history's shame – I rise;
Up from a past that's rooted in pain – I rise;
Leaving behind nights of terror and fear – I rise;
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear – I rise;
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave
I am the dream and the hope of the slave,
I rise,
I rise,
I rise.

From every fear, every dark memory, every disappointment, every carefully nursed resentment, and in the name of him who was raised from death, we are called to rise, to rise, to rise. Otherwise, our faith will indeed prove to be “an idle tale.”

So now let's take a look at the corporate level at which our faith in the resurrection might be worked out. By “corporate level” I include our families, our communities, our work and study places, and our national (and international) life. We, believers in the resurrection, must surely align ourselves with the energy released by Christ's victory over despair, darkness, disillusionment, and (yes) death. We must do this by committing ourselves to the cause of justice and peace.

This morning's news informed us that the armed forces of Syria had regained control of Palmyra from Isis. The headline on my screen said it all: “Message to terrorists – ‘Palmyra will rise again’”. The resurrection motif is as important in international affairs as in private life. For the Christian, today's Easter message of life over death, hope over despair gives him/her the focus, the motivation, the strength, to play our part with others of goodwill in the struggle to build a better world.

The other item in this morning's news, one that dominates the headlines in all our newspapers this morning, is the centenary of the Easter Rising and the beginnings of a new nation to be called the Republic of Ireland. We should never forget the forces that were in play at this critical time in Ireland's history. There had been decades during which one attempt after another at providing Home Rule for the Irish had been aborted in the British Parliament. Ireland was occupied by British troops even as tens of thousands of its citizens served the British cause in the First World War. Four hundred and sixty five people were killed in the proclamation of independence issued on Easter Monday 1916. Once hundred and thirty two of these were officers in the British Army. This led to the infamous reprisal – the execution of sixteen “rebels” – the martyrs needed to sway public opinion and instigate decades of further trouble and death. W.B. Yeats wrote his magnificent poem “Easter 1916” as a response to all this.

In his poem, Yeats refers to the people who constituted the insurrection against the British. They were just ordinary people – “people you pass with a nod of the head”, people “with whom you exchange polite, meaningless words”, people “with whom you have a drink”. Among them were housewives, schoolteachers, drunkards. A whole range of very, very ordinary people. The reprisals taken by the British army scandalised people like this, angered them, radicalised them. And, concludes Yeats “a terrible beauty was born.”

It's salutary to notice how the idea of radicalisation and extremism was engendered a century ago in a very British context and amongst Christian people. It's necessary to pause at this point so that we can take a more considered view of the current debate about radicalisation and extremism as if it was a consequence, uniquely, of Islamic culture and belief.

But back to the point. The metaphor of resurrection can be applied by all kinds of people. It's the Christian's challenge, believing the fact of a victory over all that dirties human living, to work with others of goodwill to build a better world.

Then, and only then, can the Easter victory be released from its restricted viewing and given a general circulation.

The Lord is risen! Alleluia!
This is no "idle tale". He is risen indeed!
No tale told by an idiot then.
Alleluia!