

'That Message Spread'

**A sermon preached by Andrew Knowles at St George's Church
Kendal on Easter Day, 16 April 2017**

Readings: Acts 10:34-43; Colossians 3:1-4; Matthew 28:1-10

From Acts Chapter 10 verse 37, three words:

'That message spread!'

The Apostle Simon Peter is speaking to a Gentile family – they have no Jewish background – the head of the household is, Cornelius, a professional soldier in the Roman army with the rank of centurion. He has command of a hundred men.

Peter tells them about Jesus 'Christ' – Jesus 'Anointed One' – filled with the Holy Spirit and commissioned by God to do good, to heal diseases, and to deliver those oppressed by the devil.

Peter and others had accompanied Jesus and seen what he did – in Judea and in Jerusalem.

They saw Jesus executed by crucifixion – a Roman penalty – but on the third day after his death God raised him to life.

Peter and others witnessed this – met with the Risen Jesus, ate and drank with him –

and were commanded by him to preach the good news:

*Jesus is the one ordained by God to be judge of all,
the living and the dead . . .
and through Jesus there is forgiveness of sins*

(Acts 10:42,43).

The news about Jesus is *good* news: news of forgiveness,
peace with God and each other;
and victory – of good over evil and life over death.

'That message spread!'

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From Matthew's Gospel, we have an account of the first Easter morning.

On our reading sheet, it is side by side with John's account – which is significantly different.

At least they haven't sat down at the kitchen table and fixed their story!

Anyway, the overall message is the same:
on the Sunday after the Friday on which Jesus died and was buried,
certain women came to the tomb
and found that the body of Jesus wasn't there.

John's account is reasonably quiet and understated
as befits the early morning (though there's a lot of running around).
He concludes with Mary Magdalene encountering Jesus in the
garden near the tomb.

He is disarmingly frank, because -
setting aside Magdala's personal history -
he admits that she at first mistakes him for the gardener!

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Matthew, by contrast, gives his account of the Resurrection a lot of wellie, with earthquake, dazzling angel and pole-axed guards.

The angel's message is that Jesus 'has been raised from the dead – and you will see him'.

'With fear and great joy,' he says, two women run to tell the disciples – only to meet Jesus, who hails them with the word; "Greetings!" (in Greek, Χαίρετε *Chairete*) which means 'rejoice exceedingly – be well / thrive!').

He tells them not to be afraid,
and promises to meet with his friends in Galilee . . .

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There was a BBC survey published last week (*The Times* 10 April 2017) which found that a quarter of Christians in Britain don't believe in the resurrection of Jesus (I'm not going to ask you to put your hands up) – although a fifth of the population of the UK believe in some sort of life after death.

We can see from these first accounts that believing in the resurrection of Jesus was never straightforward.

But the testimony of the witnesses is that,
whether early in the morning or late at night,
in a garden or upper room, on a country road or by a sea shore –
and in the experience of Paul of Tarsus, at high noon, in company,
on a major road –

Jesus was encountered as the Risen Christ – his greeting familiar,
his wounds for all to see,
his teaching profound,
and his authority assured.

Those who saw him were *invited* to believe –
told not to be afraid,
but rather to rejoice,
and to share with others what they now knew.

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Of course it's an act of faith to believe in the resurrection of Jesus.

I'm not surprised when people say they're not sure;

but in fact the resurrection of Jesus informs and shapes our whole life.

The fact that it happened has changed everything.

As a result of the resurrection, we know the character of God:
He is a God who loves, has mercy – who saves!

Now in the whole of life we look for resurrection –

We love it when things turn out well, when a celebrity emerges from ten years of addiction to pick up their career, when a team in a lower league wins the cup. We love new beginnings – and happy endings.

Why do we not, instead, enthuse about apathy and indifference, or abandon ourselves to superstition –
with the Ancient Greeks opt for stoicism, or with Ancient Rome prefer cruelty?

Because of the resurrection of Jesus!

Because of the resurrection of Jesus, goodness, meaning and purpose are in our DNA.

We rejoice in healing, wisdom, forgiveness and reconciliation.

It's as though the resurrection of Jesus from the dead was the missing piece in our understanding – all that was needed for everything else to fall into place.

It doesn't matter what percentage of people say they don't believe in the resurrection, because it's quite clear from our underlying attitudes that we all do!

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Last Sunday a passenger on a United Airlines flight, Dr David Dao, was forcibly removed from his seat and dragged screaming and bleeding from a plane at O'Hare International Airport in Chicago.

- The video footage has had 3 million hits on YouTube
- Thousands took to Facebook and Twitter to demand a boycott of the airline
- 20,000 signed a petition demanding the resignation of the airline's chief executive
- The value of the company's shares dropped by 1%

And ringing in our ears, the screams of the man and the cries of some women: 'My God!' 'My God' 'O My God, look what you've done to him!'

That story went viral because it resonates with the passion of Jesus: an innocent person was being made to suffer unjustly – publically beaten and humiliated without charge or conviction.

That's not news in North Korea or Saudi Arabia or Bangladesh, because in those societies bullying officialdom is standard.

But for us, it was a mini-passion and at the start of Holy Week.

Because of what happened to Jesus –
and because God vindicated him by resurrection,
we know such events are abhorrent.

The resurrection of Jesus has changed everything.

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On Monday there was PC Keith Palmer's funeral in Southwark Cathedral. He was stabbed to death while guarding the Palace of Westminster.

His coffin had rested overnight in the Chapel of St Mary Undercroft – an honour reserved for royalty and heads of state.

Police officers from all over the country, as well as thousands of members of the public, lined the streets as the cortège passed.

In his sermon, the Dean of Southwark Andrew Nunn said:

'That supreme act of love, that in a split second led Keith to act as he did, for each of us here, will bear fruit, fruit that will last. This good man did something, gave everything. Evil will not succeed – it has already been defeated'

Church Times 13 April 2017

That's Christian.

That's Jesus' own teaching on the true significance of a life laid down for others

Did anyone shout 'Rubbish!'?

Did anyone commend, instead, indifference, apathy, or the right to walk away?

It's because of the resurrection of Jesus that we know self-sacrifice to be the highest form of love – an expression of the love of God himself

So we can offer such comfort in the face of tragedy,
have such a perspective
share such a hope.

The resurrection of Jesus has changed everything.

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To believe in the Resurrection of Jesus is an act of faith
But it's more a step into the light than a leap in the dark.

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I was reading about Peter Higgs.

Fifty years ago, as a young theoretical physicist,
he predicted the existence of a new kind of sub-atomic particle

It wasn't new, of course,

It was a tiny fraction of a second younger than the Big Bang

It was a particle which *must be present* for other particles to form
'mass' and so provide the building blocks for the universe.

Thanks to the Hadron Collider – an expensive piece of kit -
Peter Higgs' particle was finally observed and dubbed 'the Higgs
Boson'.

Now, much to his embarrassment, he has a knighthood,
a Nobel Prize, and a Centre for Innovation named after him

(*The Times* 29 March 2017)

Peter Higgs' initial thought was:

*SOMETHING HAPPENED – AND MUST STILL BE HAPPENING –
FOR THINGS TO BE AS THEY ARE*

That's what I mean about the resurrection of Jesus.

It's not about the percentage of people who believe it –
it's the evidence of how the world and our understanding of God,
of life and death, of suffering, of good and evil,
and of hope for the future was transformed *FROM A CERTAIN POINT.*

FROM THAT POINT

- The witnesses were prepared to die for their message
- The first day of the week, Sunday, became the Christian holy day
- The years of modern history are counted from the approximate birth of Jesus

And we got Christmas! Christmas is only significant because the child whose birth we celebrate was raised from death.

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The resurrection of Jesus has changed everything!

And the Resurrection of Jesus changes us.

A fifth of non-religious people in the UK believe in some sort of life after death.

Be that as it may, what we're talking about, thanks to the resurrection of Jesus, is life *now* – and an experience of heaven *now*.

'If you have been raised with Christ,' writes St Paul to the Christians at Colossae (and this is before the writing of the gospels), 'seek the

things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God' (Colossians 3:1).

He speaks of 'Christ who is your life' (v.4)

'Christ who is *your* life'.

The resurrection of Jesus is also *our* resurrection!

It's as though a missing piece has been provided,
by which everything else falls into place
and makes perfect sense.

Helen Keller was blind and deaf, but when she learned about Jesus, she said, 'I already know him – I just didn't know his name'

[**Helen Keller** (1880-1968) was an American author, political activist, and lecturer. She was the first deaf-blind person to earn a Bachelor of Arts degree. The story of how Keller's teacher, Anne Sullivan, broke through the isolation imposed by a near complete lack of language, has become widely known through the play and film *The Miracle Worker*.]

The resurrection of Jesus puts a name and a date and an on-going relevance to what we already experience of the presence and love and power of God.

Christ is *our* life – We can rejoice. We can thrive .

We can banish fear. We can share what we now know.

'That message spread'

It's like a river from a source, irrigating and blessing the world –

But we're not in a stagnant pool beside that river – we're in the swim of it. Right through us, this Easter Day, flows the resurrection of Jesus, giving life, forgiveness, comfort and hope.

And, please God, flows through us, so that this message continues to spread.