

Easter Sunday 2021 - sermon notes

Isaiah 25.6–9; Psalm 118.1–2, 14–24; Acts 10.34–43; Mark 16.1–8

In our small garden, signs of new life have appeared. This admittedly poorly tended patch of ground has green shoots rising from the soil as in indication that the tulip and daffodil bulbs are getting ready to bloom. This sign of spring is something I look forward to each year as the season begins to change. A kind of a foretaste - the first fruit you might say - of the beauty that will soon adorn our garden. Another sign that many of us look for is that first sight of a robin. These signs, and many others, have become for us the assurance that spring is actually on its way. In the midst of winter it is easy to believe that spring will never come but the sight of a small green shoot or a ruby breasted little bird are enough to dash those fears and produce in us an expectation of something better. Easter is for the Christian the same sort of event and it was certainly that way for the first Christians.

The day of resurrection was an even greater sign of things changing than those signs of spring. The long winter in which sin controlled the world was coming to an end and the sign that that was to happen was the resurrection of Jesus. His resurrection is the first fruit of the promised General resurrection that will finally and fully usher in the kingdom of heaven on earth. Jesus stands as the evidence that God's promise to 'restore all things' will come to pass and for that we rejoice. As we share in another Easter celebration I wish to remind us all of the wonder of this event and where it sits within the wonderful revelation of the God who loves us and the world and who has a plan to bring everything to perfection.

In the Old Testament passage from Isaiah we hear once more of the ancient promise of God to bring about the salvation of all the people on the earth. The picture painted in this portion of the Bible is of a tremendous feast and the removal of all that traps and hinders people from enjoying life the way God intended. The promise of having all the ills in the world; the injustice, the wickedness of humanity, and all want is a compelling portrait of what is to come. The people who first read the passage we heard from Isaiah were certainly not experiencing the reality of that promise. They were either awaiting destruction or it had happened and they were awaiting restoration. They were in the midst of a messy and difficult situation. Perhaps you can relate to that feeling a little more now that we have been in isolation for over a year. We wait for consolation, for rescue, for a restoration to a better life and our ancestors in the faith waited for the same thing even though their circumstances were much different. In Jesus' day the oppression from Rome, the apparent absence of God's Spirit in the Temple, and the ongoing feeling of depression were met with the message of Jesus that 'the kingdom of heaven has come near'. Part of that promise was that: "*And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces,* (Isaiah 25:7,8) A promise to have 'death swallowed up forever and to have the Lord God wipe away the tears from all faces' must have seemed impossible in the face of all the troubles of life but the resurrection of Jesus is the spring-time evidence that this promise is on the way to fulfilment.

Turning to the Psalm appointed we are urged in its first verses to “Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever! No matter what difficulty they had faced the people of Israel were urged to remember and proclaim that ‘the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases’. As they encountered difficulty after difficulty the descendants of Abraham were encouraged to keep this truth in their minds. Another psalm contains the words ‘weeping may spend the night but joy comes with the morning’. These messages recognize that sometimes life is more difficult than we think it should be. If God is really on our side then why is my life so difficult? These are thoughts that must have been in the minds of those Israelites who first sang the hymn we call Psalm 118 but they are called upon to allow their perspective to be changed and rejoice that ‘His steadfast love endures forever’. Perhaps you have heard the story of the man who was trying to teach his son about the disappointments that sometimes come with life. He told his son that he had a gift for him out in the barn. When they arrived in the stable area all the son saw was a pile of manure. The father was about to give his son the talk that he had prepared about dealing with disappointment when the boy grabbed a shovel and ran to the pile of manure and began digging furiously. Between breaths the son was heard to say, ‘with this much horse manure there has to be a pony in here somewhere’. (I can’t tell if that made you laugh but I hope it did) The reality of our lives sometimes causes us to be disappointed but a change in perspective may be the thing we need to cope with that disappointment. God’s steadfast love endures forever - remember that. The resurrection of Jesus is the first-fruit indicator that this is indeed true - even in the face of devastation

In the passage from the Acts of the Apostles we also see a hope for a future restoration brought into reality through the resurrection of Jesus. “All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sin in his name” (Acts 10:43) Part of the promise of God is that our misdeeds will not have any effect on our position in the kingdom to come. When that final trumpet sounds and the dead are resurrected the punishment for sin will not be part of our fate. What will determine that next phase of our existence is ‘belief in the one whom God sent’. When Jesus was raised he went, as St. Peter declared, not to all the people but to the ones who were chosen as witnesses. These people were chosen because of their belief and were commissioned to proclaim the message of God’s Good News out of that belief. They had seen the signs of God’s Kingdom in Jesus’ ministry and they were witnesses to the final and most important sign that God’s promises were true - the resurrection of Jesus the Messiah. If we have believed in the one whom God sent we too are chosen to be witnesses to God’s promises coming true and are commissioned to go and tell. The words ‘go and tell’ are found at the end of today’s Gospel account and so I wish to conclude my sermon with a short reflection on the scene that has been described for us by St. Mark.

Following the tumultuous week that ended with the crucifixion of Jesus the band of disciples had been scattered and were likely very dismayed. Out of a sense of duty and in order to honor the memory of their friend some of the women came to the tomb early in the morning. They may have spent the night weeping and had come to the tomb to do what they could and, perhaps, weep some more. In Mark’s rather terse style we are told that ‘they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the

right side and they were alarmed. But he said to them, ‘do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified. He has been raised; his is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, and tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.’ (Mark 16:5-7) “Go and tell” is a common phrase which is attached to the account of the resurrection. The work of salvation had been accomplished and the path forward had been set so now is the time to ‘go and tell’. What God had promised from long ago was being seen in this sign of the Resurrection of the Messiah. The first sign that the new age of God’s promise was coming is the fact that Jesus’ death tomb is empty. “Death has been swallowed up in victory” and the disciples were to be the ones to share this message with the world as its witnesses. In the command given by the young man sitting in the tomb there is the instruction to the women to go and tell the disciples (and Peter) that he would meet them in Galilee. I had read that verse many times before I was prompted to stop and look at it more closely while reading a book by the Christian author Max Lucado who asked, ‘why is Peter mentioned separately?’ Tell the disciples “and Peter”... may indeed come from the fact that Peter must have felt cast out from the disciples because of his denial of Jesus prior to the crucifixion. Yes the others had scattered but he was guilty of a great offense. Hadn’t Jesus said ‘those who deny me before others I will deny before the Father’ or words to that effect? If the tradition is true that St. Mark wrote his Gospel with St. Peter as his primary source then this verse is made even more powerful. I can well imagine Peter recounting this story in a sermon and having his voice catch as he tells about what the messenger from God had said. In that simple message came the promise of forgiveness from the terrible mistake Peter had made. “The steadfast love of the Lord endures forever” declares the Psalm and St. Peter experienced that love over and over again when he told that story.

The resurrection of Jesus declares to the world that God’s promises are coming true - that the kingdom of heaven has indeed come near. More than that the kingdom of heaven is here in and through Jesus the risen Messiah. It is also here in the hearts of those who have come to believe in Jesus. The promise of God to set a feast on the mountain and to wipe the tears from everyone’s eyes comes into reality through the people of the Messiah and their work in the world. The promise that ‘his steadfast love endures forever!’ is seen in through the love that was shared by Jesus and the love that his disciples share with the world. The promise of forgiveness for those who believe in the Messiah was felt profoundly by St. Peter and has been experienced in one way or another over the generations.

It is my prayer, and the prayer of the Wardens and other leaders in this parish family, that the reality of Jesus’ love and life will be born anew in all your hearts as we celebrate this Easter season within the circumstances brought about by the pandemic. May we live in the reality of God’s promises and look toward that reality.