

## **Born Again of Water. Born Again of Spirit. Born Again in Flesh.**

Rob Crosby-Shearer + AbbeyChurch + Easter Sunday April 9, 2023 + Matthew's gospel.

Let us pray:

*Risen Christ, we thank you that there is nothing that can separate us from your love. Not life nor death. Not powers – here or in the spirit world. Not the state nor our own brokenness. Nothing can separate us from your resurrection love. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.*

Over our Sundays this Lent, we have been invited into a series of encounters with Jesus. I don't know about you – but I've found it so rich and so thirst-quenching.

Meagan broke open for us an encounter between a religious leader of privilege and power - Nicodemus – who, at a late-night clandestine campfire encounter to seek truth from this rebel rabbi, Jesus. Elaine spoke to us of a woman encountering Jesus as she drew water mid-day to avoid meeting her neighbours due to her ostracization and was seen and freed in a whole new way. Matt spoke of in a man born blind who Jesus heals and restores to community. And Breno walked us through the grief of sisters who had lost their brother, Lazarus, to the power of death - reminding us that the power of resurrection is no magic pill, but something even deeper.

In many of those stories, Jesus uses either images of water - or even water itself - to crystalize what's happening in those encounters. “Unless you're born again of water and the Spirit, you can't see or come into God's Reign”, Jesus tells that religious leader. With the blind person, Jesus spits in mud and wipes their eyes with it - and tells them to go bathe in a pool of water. To the Samaritan woman at the well Jesus tells her to drink of the water he offers and to never be thirsty again.

This morning, one of the beloved members of this community, Charlotte braved waters of the ocean to be baptised. Now, one way we Jesus-people look at baptism is that when we descend into those waters and come up, and as we do we're dying to our broken-selves and rising with Christ into a new humanity – fully restored into community and called to practice resurrection.

And how great it is to get to do this – on this the feast of the resurrection! For Jesus Christ is risen today!! Alleluia.

And with the resurrection of Jesus, we proclaim that while they still may be present, the forces of addiction and fear and greed and violence will never have the last word. And by this, I mean that *all* systems of death. Yes, we still wrestle – but they have no real power over the love and grace of the risen Jesus.

And today's encounter is with the resurrected One – whom, in his resurrected state, the women met first. Today's encounter is with the One who said to them – “do not fear”.

For both then *and* today in the waters of baptism, our encounter isn't merely with another human being – but with the very Love that casts out all fear! And though

Christ was fully human - today our encounter is not merely with a good teacher or revolutionary prophet - though Christ was all those as well. *Today*, we encounter the God of all creation - who descended to the depths of the dead – to all the hell that could be thrown his way - and rose up again:

Jesus – crucified and risen – Jesus our hope.

And Lord knows we all need some hope. Every time that I mention the word “collapse” – be it the collapse of healthcare, or government, or education, or economics, or, yes, the institutional church... people nod knowingly. There’s a very real sense out there that the centre can no longer hold. And, worse than that, that so much, really is, dying and falling apart.

On Good Friday Matt’s video powerful montage captured, in news footage, this sense of collapse that we live in; where our systems and our ways of being can no longer hold together. It was a sobering reminder of the world unravelling – and how poignant it was, set alongside the crucifixion of Jesus.

We know that much of that collapse is necessary; the collapse of patriarchy or colonialism; the exposure of the ungodly rot of those and other systems of oppression. And yet, other elements of this collapse are tragic; the collapse of climate, the crisis of loneliness, our world where it’s getting harder to thrive. And whether the collapse is needed or tragic, let’s face it - a lot of people are getting hurt as things fall.

We Christians claim that this is why Good Friday happened – and it’s one reason why we posit that Jesus chose non-violence rather than resist death. Good Friday happens because God’s love so embraces us - our suffering, our brokenness and the collapse around us - that God stepped in the way – acted in solidarity with creation to absorb all that pain and brokenness. As his followers, we too weep alongside what is happening to his beloved creation because of our collective and personal missing of the mark.

But the good news is that were not stuck there in lament or guilt or fear.

For Christ is Risen indeed – and the church has always insisted that this is no mere metaphor or symbol. That no matter how much it messes with our enlightenment view of the universe, what happened 2000 years ago when the heavy stone was rolled away is the real, fleshy, embodied thing.

And the implications don’t end with that one moment. For from that moment on, the power and possibility of that grace and freedom and liberation began entering each of our lives, and indeed, into the very heart of all creation.

For of all the encounters we’ve heard about in our ancient sacred stories this Lent, this one – the encounter with the *resurrected* Jesus - is the ultimate one of all.

This is the encounter of a God who took the cross - an instrument of state torture and turned it into an emblem of solidarity. Who was assassinated and came back with a love which disarmed and embraced his oppressors.

Some have asked me what happens to a departed relative or friend after death – and this has everything to do with what we celebrate today. As much as many secular or scientific worldviews or nature-based spiritualities are good and beautiful and compatible with our faith – few, if any engage that question of what happens after death.

One theologian talks about our hope; *our* resurrection of the body as ‘life after life after death.’ Yes, the story of our faith insists that life doesn’t end here – but that we will, after death, first be in union with the divine – “today, you’ll be with me in paradise”, Jesus said to the thief on the cross beside him, as we heard on Friday. In life, in death, in life beyond death – our UCC creed says - we are never alone.

But even better - yes - the story doesn’t end even *there* – for, if it did, it could just be pie in the sky when we die. But we go even further than that; insisting that our bodies, in their fleshy goodness, will one day be resurrected; a mystery of cellular re-constitution; that what once was dead, and even completely decayed, will rise again; and all of the pain and sorrow and trauma and hurt will be shed off into a new and glorious fleshy physicality.

And this is important, not just for future hope, but because it reminds us that our bodies in all their diversely-shapen forms are good and beautiful; that matter, the world, the earth - is blessed; and not something to be disregarded or disposed of... but to be honoured and cared for.

And then, yes, *even better yet* - I would suggest, that what happened in that resurrection revolution some 2000 years ago, reverberates forward to address the collapse and compost and decay of all creation – which is, indeed, groaning – waiting for the fulfilment of God’s beloved children – for a fullness of time when God will reconcile all things to God’s-self – things here on earth and things in the heavens. The ultimate reconciliation. The ultimate coming of the community of shalom. I don’t pretend to begin to know just what all this resurrection and rebirth will look like – never mind the science or metaphysics behind it. But do I know that it helps me get up in the morning when I feel I can’t go on.

For this, friends, is our story. *This* is our hope. For the resurrection of Jesus calls us to dance and rejoice in the face of collapse. Not to treat it glibly, but to party as if another world, where all is made right, is possible and is, in fact, already here.

The resurrection calls each of us to shed the broken parts of our humanity and rise anew - to be born again of water and the spirit – just as Charlotte did in the cold, beautiful waters of the Pacific Ocean this morning.

The resurrection calls us to a bigger story than the story of collapse; being signs and symbols of God's reign of justice, peace and joy. Matt's Good Friday montage didn't just show the signs of collapse – but also of powerful resistance to injustice; to sexism and patriarchy and fascism and the forces of the devil and death. In this, we are called to follow Jesus to practice resurrection as the ultimate collective power of life over death, of peace over violence, of love over hatred and of hope over fear.

The resurrection reminds us that though life his hard, it reminds of the power of the One who calls us to rebirth, quenches all our thirst, who rubs spit and mud on our eyes, who unbinds us into a new life, calling us out of our caves of collapse and decay and echoes those words Jesus said to those women: *Do. Not. Fear.*

So and I'll end with this - it's a poet who says is best when they say this:

*Make no mistake: if he rose at all It was as His body; If the cell's dissolution did not reverse, the molecule reknit, the amino acids rekindle, The Church will fall. Let us not mock God with metaphor, analogy, sidestepping, transcendence, Making of the event a parable, a sign painted in the faded credulity of earlier ages: Let us walk through the door. The stone is rolled back, not papier-mache, Not a stone in a story, but the vast rock of materiality that in the slow grinding of time will eclipse for each of us. The wide light of day.* (Updike, 3 of the 7 stanzas for Easter)

Do not fear, siblings – for we're called into that wide light of day and there is nothing – not anything that can separate us from God's love. Do not fear for there will be a great reunion and reconciliation.

Because Christ lives all is grace – our guilt and fear is gone – no matter what we have done or left undone – we arise from the waters, lighter than before – and now we can face tomorrow, awaiting our death and resurrection and the renewal of all things.

This is our story.

That Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia! *(say it with me, friends)...*  
Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia!

Amen.