

Easter morning at St John and St Stephen's 31.03.24 Year B.

**Acts 10:34-43 & Mark 16:1-8**

### **The life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the pattern for all of life.**

A couple of years ago, our neighbour got in touch to complain about a tree in our garden that was spreading its roots to her side of the boundary, and upending her fence. The company that manages the house we live in came to visit and declared the tree to be diseased. We knew that already because although it was a nice little tree, half of it was always withered, so we accepted it would be coming down.

The property management company engaged a professional gardener who visited our garden whilst I was out, to do the work. When I returned, Chris had already arrived home and his first words to me were: 'I think you'd better prepare yourself'. When I went into the garden, it looked completely different. Not only had the tree disappeared, but also the whole green boundary which had been made up of the neighbour's bush growing over into our side, and providing privacy and greenery just where it was needed. The garden looked completely denuded; we could see right into her side, and an ugly set of concrete posts had emerged on our side, that had previously been entirely covered up by greenery.

A someone who'd fallen in love with gardening during lockdown, and who'd got used to a certain privacy the garden afforded, I felt bereft, a little like Gerard Manley Hopkins who lamented the felling of the Binsey poplars (*Binsey Poplars, 1879*) or Charlotte Mew, the destruction of plane trees in London's Euston Square (*The Trees are Down, early 1920s*).

However, as most of you gardeners will know, nature has a habit of springing back to life. The last time I went out, although the tree is definitely no more, the bush is growing back apace and soon the ugly fence will no doubt be covered again with something alive and growing. It'll probably look much like it did before in a couple more years. After all that destruction, I was quite delighted to see it again – even though it's not really our bush.

At each stage of the life, death and resurrection of Christ, his own people had great difficulty grasping what was going on, even though they'd been waiting for a Messiah as long as they could remember. Coming to terms with Jesus as Messiah was tricky, but his death was even worse, and as for resurrection – out of the question.

I don't think we would have fared much better. That God should 'take frail flesh and die' (to quote a well-known hymn) is difficult enough, but to accept that he rose from the dead was pretty much beyond the imagination of most of his followers, despite his having told them on numerous occasions that this was going to happen.

We get a strong sense of this in Mark's account of the resurrection. Mark's account is the shortest and the most honest, in that he ends his gospel with absence and silence. Jesus isn't in the tomb, and doesn't appear again\* And the women run off and say nothing to anyone. Absence and silence. Hardly an inspiring way to end an account of the life of Jesus.

So, the followers of Jesus had just about taken on board his life and death, but the third part, the resurrection, was totally beyond their comprehension. In the Acts reading, we read this: 'They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day'. We now say this as part of our Creed, but putting that into formal words would take another three hundred years.

Perhaps resurrection is something you have to experience to believe. The women who went to the tomb were terrified and alarmed, because they did not expect an empty tomb, and they did not expect an angel. But they had to get on with it, because clearly something mind-blowing had happened.

Easter morning at St John and St Stephen's 31.03.24 Year B.

Although we say we believe in the resurrection, it's another thing to experience it in your own life, even figuratively. Richard Rohr writes of life, death and resurrection being the universal pattern for all of human experience. As we mature, it's a helpful model to begin to observe in your own life. Which things are dying off and which things are coming to life?

Rohr is not the only writer to come up with this three-fold pattern; Walter Bruggeman does something similar with the psalms - of orientation, disorientation and reorientation. For Rohr, the first part of life, if we're lucky (and not everyone is) is when we feel innocent and safe. 'Everything is basically good; it all means something and we feel a part of what looks normal and deserved' (*The Universal Christ*, p. 244). He calls this stage ORDER.

Sooner or later, as we grow up (and this can happen from the start if you're someone unlucky enough to have been born into an abusive family, or born into war or famine) - sooner or later we start to experience DISORDER. We could call this The Fall - as in Adam and Eve - and inherent in any honest account of human life. As Rohr writes: 'your wife dies; your father loses his job; you are rejected on the playground; you fail an exam .. or you finally realise that many people are excluded from ... 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness'' This is the time when reality kicks in.

I expect most of us here have experienced multiple examples of disorder. Some of us have lost parents; children; partners; health; relationships; even church can be a source of loss sometimes. If you're young, and life seems still to be good and innocent, you're at least aware that some of your friends are having it bad, and that mental health challenges are rife.

Finally, Rohr talks about the stage called REORDER. This he calls 'life on the other side of death; the victory on the other side of failure; the joy on the other side of (pain)' (as before, p. 248). The thing about suffering is that we have to go through it; there's normally no way round it, but God accompanies us in it. That's the meaning of crucifixion and resurrection. The very things we've had to go through become, when entrusted to Christ, portals through which we receive God and share him with others.

In this stage of REORDERING, we try to make sense of the difficult things that have happened. We come to terms with them; we don't fight them. We become mature enough to criticise our own group, without judging and leaving it. This is a real challenge for Christians who've long been engaging with the messy stuff of human life that we come across in churches - and who have nevertheless stuck with Christ, and stuck with Christians. If you've managed to do that, you're in a minority, according to Rohr.

So I wonder if you can trace this pattern of order; disorder and re-ordering in your own life? It's certainly a good thing to do when watching the direst news on the TV. Whenever there is hatred and violence, injustice and suffering, someone somewhere is able to envisage a different path - one of new life and new hope. Let us continue to pray for peace-makers everywhere.

The idea of resurrection is out there in the public domain and in culture, regardless of whether it comes attached to the actual resurrection of Christ from the dead. In the world of film, *The Lazarus Project* and *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* spring to mind (maybe the topic of a future Lent Film Club!) Lorna shared a story with me, which I'll briefly read in a minute, which illustrates this idea of resurrection being understood by the wider culture, and then I'm going to invite Alan to share his own story of death and resurrection.

I want to preface Lorna's account, which is about healing, by saying that it will no doubt be your experience, like mine, that not everyone we pray for experiences a miracle. But every time we pray for someone, *God does*

Easter morning at St John and St Stephen's 31.03.24 Year B.

*something*. So we continue to do just that. Another thing to remember as we go through tough times, is that Christ has gone there before. It's utterly natural to want the rough times to end, but when we're caught up in them, it seems they never will.

Remember the disciples, though. If God could surprise them with his wonderful deliverance, he can do the same for us. Just be on the look-out that deliverance doesn't look like what we thought it would like, and is sometimes something we never even prayed about.

Before we hear these two resurrection stories, I want to leave you with an invitation to consider times in your life where you've experienced death and resurrection (not literally, but figuratively). It seems we can't have one without the other. Have you experienced the death of someone or something you were holding onto? What might be emerging in the wake of that loss? What is the 'resurrection' that God is bringing forth out of this difficult experience?

Lorna writes:

"My very close friend Carol's mum, Gwen had been unwell and it was decided that she would have to undergo surgery. I don't remember now what the problem was, but it was quite serious. We were about to have a "Prayer for healing" service at St John and St Stephen's, led by Suzanne Knight, and we were invited to put forward names of those we wished to be included. I told Suzanne about Gwen and she was prayed for, along with other names sent forward.

I was naturally delighted when Carol told me her mum had pulled through her serious operation. She said that when the surgeon went to see her after the op, he said, "Welcome back Lazarus! Twice we thought we had lost you." When I next saw Gwen she said, "Lorna, please thank your church for their prayers."

We end with a testimony to resurrection from Alan:

## **My 'Death and Resurrection' story**

### **My Death**

As many of you know, 2½ years ago, after an exercise session at home on my treadmill, I suffered a cardiac arrest. I had finished my exercise session and had a shower, but my heart was racing and I didn't feel well. I sat on my bed and alerted Trish, my wife, saying, "I think I'm in trouble".

I was not aware that Trish had phoned 999, but 8 minutes later an ambulance crew arrived and witnessed my cardiac arrest, and I then lost consciousness. It took nearly a half an hour of CPR, (which broke all my ribs!), and 7 electric shocks to revive my heart.

Easter morning at St John and St Stephen's 31.03.24 Year B.

By that time, there were 3 ambulances outside my house and an Air Ambulance crew had arrived who took over and prepared me for an emergency operation at the Royal Berkshire Hospital. I had apparently, suffered a 100% blockage of the main artery feeding the left side of my heart.

I was taken to the Intensive Care Unit and given a stent to open up the blocked artery, but I then suffered another cardiac arrest. I was quickly resuscitated and then put into a coma for 3 days with medication to try and disperse the various blood clots that remained in my heart. I was given a 50:50 chance of survival, and at that time it wasn't clear whether I had sustained any brain damage. You can imagine the anguish that my poor wife suffered not knowing if I would survive, and if I did, would I still be the same person?

### **My Resurrection**

After 5 days in ICU, I became conscious again, most of the wires and lines that had kept me alive were removed, my airway breathing tube was removed, and I was moved to the rehab ward. My first (rather croaky) and confused question was "what happened?" – I had been oblivious to everything!

After another week in the rehab ward, I was discharged and sent home with a new regime of medicines and various follow up appointments to help me to recover from my ordeal. I also had a long visit from the Air Ambulance Liaison Officer and a session with the Cardiac team at RBH. They both 'walked me through' each stage of my ordeal since I had no memory of any aspect of it. The cardiac team put me on a physical exercise regime which has led me back into the gym 3 times a week. Although I have suffered permanent damage to my heart as a result of the cardiac arrest, I am generally fitter now than before my cardiac arrest. I continue to deal with some mental health issues, but all in all, it was a true miracle that I survived, more or less intact!

So, having been given a second chance of life, what are the main lessons I have learnt? There are many:

- the importance of family (including my Church family), my friends, my faith (the 3 'f's), and love. Without love, we are nothing – my wonderful wife saved my life and endured so much throughout my ordeal. My immediate family, my grandchildren, my friends, and my love of music all make life worth living!
- The power of prayer – it does work and miracles can happen!
- life is precious – it is a gift. We often take it for granted and fill our lives with material 'things', or become preoccupied with matters that are not really important. None of us knows how long that gift will last – live your life to make a difference, and make memories while you can!

I have always been an active and busy person planning out much of my life, making too many assumptions over things that are way beyond my control. I lost my youngest son

Easter morning at St John and St Stephen's 31.03.24 Year B.

to cancer 38 years ago, and this recent cardiac event has been another step in my life's journey. These days, I wake each day feeling grateful to be alive, and thankful to be blessed with all I have. I live my life one day at a time. Trish and I continue to make memories, and I continue to try and use the gifts I have to make a difference!

Thanks be to God. Amen.

\*unless you count the longer ending of Mark, added later.

Rev. Claire Alcock.