

## Easter 2025

‘These words seemed to them an idle tale’ – as well it might. The disciples had seen a death, and they knew death when they saw it. No one came back from death – except in the pagan mythologies, where there was Orpheus who’d gone to the land of the dead to rescue his wife Eurydice, and Persephone who lived in the land of the dead but reappeared every Spring. An idle tale means something that plays with the paganism of the oppressors: the Romans politically, and more insidiously, the Greeks as cultural colonisers.

Mind you, there were some among the Jews who were hoping for a resurrection of the dead, and Jesus himself was of this opinion, but – no one had ever seen evidence of this. And an empty tomb was not conclusive evidence in itself – it could be empty for any of a number of reasons. But the women who’d gone to embalm the body – they’d had to postpone it for a couple of days because of the Mosaic law against working on the Sabbath – the women, some of whom are named in today’s gospel, reported seeing a vision of men in dazzling white clothing who told them Jesus was alive. This was the idle tale. Peter alone – in this version of the story – decides to check it out, sees, and returns home in a state of amazement.

The experience for these observers, if we can call them that, of the – at this early stage, rather tenuous - evidence Jesus' resurrection is unprecedented. It takes place in a world dominated by the presence of death and the fear of death.

If you go to the ancient city of Petra in the Jordanian desert, you see the remains of a society where people lives in caves in which the dead were also buried. And Petra was not alone in this – ancient Egypt went to even greater lengths to try to overcome death, and thereby their own fear of death. The place of the dead for ancient Greeks and Romans was also a place filled with fearful beings, and dreadful punishments. The Jewish people alone were scornful of these pagan anxieties: for them, life and death were all in the hands of a just but merciful God, a God in whom (Psalm 85):

Mercy and truth are met together;

Righteousness and peace have kissed each other.

Righteousness meaning justice. Think about this, and apply it to our situation for a moment: for the readers of this psalm, mercy and truth go together. For us in Australia in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, real truth-telling about the history of our country; and yet also mercy to the memory of those who face up to the truth. Justice – real, restorative justice to those who've been disadvantaged by our history; and yet also peace – peace that is fair. That means not an unjust peace, not peace that concedes territory to the bully and lets the bully get away with it. Just peace – righteous peace.

So there was less anxiety about death within the Judaism of these early disciples of Jesus – but still, no one had seen evidence of resurrection; and while the majority of Jewish people expected resurrection, some - of a more conservative turn of mind - denied it altogether.

Then there's this – event. An empty tomb, a report of risen life; a heady mixture of fear and dismissive denial and pure amazement. That's what we have today, in this gospel.

What do we have in the wider society, among all those friends and neighbours of ours who are not with us in church, either this church or other churches. Well, paradoxically I think we have two diametrically opposed assumptions about the world.

One continues the disciples' scornful dismissal of the women's report: this report is just an idle tale, a delusion – in the words of one public commentator. I think we're all familiar with this attitude. Most people we meet are respectful, but if we get as far as inviting them to come to church it's a polite thanks but no thanks.

The other set of assumptions suggests that we Christians have actually told this story very effectively over the centuries, because most people nowadays are not afraid of death. They / we may be afraid of the process of dying, but we don't beat

ourselves up with worry about what it'll be like to be dead. We might grieve for our friends who die, but we don't fear for them. And so we have minimised the reality of death. Every week we can watch *Midsommer Murders* or *Death in Paradise* or some meatier version of the murder mystery genre – and in all of these, death is nothing more than a problem to be solved. We see the same phenomenon even more in those computer games where your character dies; upon which you simply start over again. Death has become unreal in these narratives: it is death that has become the idle tale. We Christians have been a bit too successful in spreading the message that death is overcome:

Death, you shall die, as the 17<sup>th</sup> century poet John Donne put it. But note that this is still in the future tense – for John Donne, death was never to be minimised: death was real. And he was correct in this perception of death. Death does separate us from those we love; from those we have offended or hurt; and death does cause us an ongoing, sometimes unending sense of loss – that is not something to be minimised or understated.

This is also not a problem to be solved, and Easter does not even attempt to solve it. What Easter does is – in the first instance – hold out a sliver of possibility in what some choose to call the delusion of a risen Christ; the sliver of possibility that – not just for Christ but for us as well – that there just may be more to reality than meets

the eye; that maybe this death-thing is not the end of the story; that just maybe there is life that breaks through the seemingly implacable shell of death.

That is the point of our proclamation – not that death is unreal, but that there is more to reality, and that this event of Easter has given us a glimpse of this larger, more just and yet more merciful reality, this more truthful and yet more peace-filled reality – that we are yet to see in its fulness. Our proclamation today is very simple:

Christ is risen!

He is risen indeed!