

EASTER SERMON:

"What We Believe"

The tomb was sealed.
But the tomb couldn't hold him.

The guards were armed.
But the guards couldn't hold him.

Three days had passed.
But time couldn't hold him.

The man was dead.
But death couldn't hold him.

Mary Magdalene tried.
But she couldn't hold him.

The door was shut.
But the room couldn't hold him.

And when he walked to the top of the hill
And bid his friends goodbye, gravity,
Even gravity could not hold him.

So how come we can hold him,
Closer than a brother?
How come we can hold him,
Whenever two or three are gathered together?

Death has been swallowed up in victory.
That's how.
And even gravity is no match for love.
(*Bob Hartman*)

Surprise!

How did those first disciples feel, early in the morning, when Mary Magdalene came banging on their door, proclaiming, 'Jesus is alive'?

Leave us alone. Let us work through our grief in our own way. We're not ready to talk. Everything we've done for the last three years is wasted! Go away.

But she wouldn't go. 'I've seen him! I've seen the Lord! He's alive!'

Do you remember the Cilla Black TV programme: Surprise, Surprise? Cilla would appear on someone's doorstep and announce: I got a surprise for you, and then something amazing would happen: a long lost brother, who no one had seen for 30 years, would appear, and everyone would burst into tears; or a long held dream

would suddenly be fulfilled as the hapless victim was whisked away to meet a childhood hero, or make a parachute jump, or do whatever.

Was the resurrection that kind of surprise? Well certainly, nobody was expecting it. Mary came banging on the door, 'I've seen the Lord. He's alive!

That's the interesting fact about the resurrection day. Despite all the disciples had seen Jesus do, the healings, the miracles; despite all that Jesus had told them about how he would be killed and on the third day would be raised again, even after the Last Supper when Jesus shared the bread and wine with them, not one of them expected - after his death on the cross, not one of them even hoped – ever to see Jesus again.

No one stood watch near the tomb, just in case something might happen. No one waited, just to see if he would rise. No-one organised a brass band to be waiting, or had the bread and wine handy for an impromptu Dawn Eucharist. No one thought to invite the BBC along to have a quick sound bite. 'So Caiaphas, you must feel a bit silly now. How does it feel to have handed the Son of God over to the Romans?'

No, all we hear about are two women going to the tomb to anoint the body.

When Jesus died their hopes died, their convictions died, their faith died, and there they were, in fear for their own lives, huddled in the upper room where just a few days before they had celebrated the Passover. No one expected the resurrection. Despite all that they had seen; despite all they had been told; despite all that they had experienced.

But, Praise God -- it happened! It happened because God made it happen.

And not only did God make it happen, but He went on to revive the faith of those disciples, he revived their dead convictions and restored the hopes that they had lost.

And it's because of the resurrection that we worship God today. If it had never happened the disciples would never have lasted, they would never have had the courage, the audacity, the nerve, to say another word about Jesus in public, let alone to claim that He rose and is Lord of the living and the dead.

Hear the words of Paul - he who just a few years later experienced for himself the presence of the risen Christ as he travelled along the road to Damascus to persecute and kill Christ's followers.

'What I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures, that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day - also according to the Scriptures.'

Can we really believe it? Paul's first hearers must have wondered that as well, because Paul wrote:

'He appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the

apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.' (1 Cor 15)

It seems that he was authenticating the truth of what he proclaimed.

The resurrection is the most important thing that we believe in as Christians. It is the centre of our faith, the foundation of our Christian experience, the goal towards which our lives move.

The resurrection is of first importance to us, not just because it's a happy ending to the story of Jesus. It's a story that ends with a happy beginning. It's the beginning of our story, a story in which our faith can triumph over death, just as did the faith of Jesus.

As Christians we are urged again and again to trust and accept the reality of the resurrection and to make it part of our lives through faith in the one who rose from the dead. We are called to believe in the power and the love that it shows - to believe in the power and love of God to bring goodness out of evil; life out of death; hope out of despair.

We are promised that when we trust in the power and love of God, a power and love that can raise the dead to life, then our lives will be blessed, and we will be a blessing to others.

We are promised that what we believe can make a difference to us - it affects the core of our being, shapes us and make us who we are, - it either blesses us by opening us up to the power of God, or else it afflicts us because it blinds us to what we could be and what God is trying to do for us. We can't be neutral – it demands that we make a choice. Do we really live the resurrection life?

Here's a story:

Once upon a time a farmer found the egg of an eagle, out in the fields. It had been abandoned for some reason by its mother, but as it was still warm he took it and put it in the nest of one of his broody hens along with the other eggs that she was sitting on. After a period of time an eaglet was hatched, and with the other chicks began to run about the backyard doing what chickens did. He scratched the earth for worms and insects. He looked for the corn that the man would throw into the yard. He clucked and cackled as best as he could, and as he grew, like the other chickens, he thrashed his wings and flew a few feet in the air.

Years passed in this way. One day he saw a magnificent bird far above him in the cloudless sky. It glided majestically among the powerful wind currents, soaring and swooping, scarcely beating its long golden wings.

The old eagle looked at it in awe and asked "what is that?"

"That is the eagle, the king of the birds", said one of his neighbours. "He belongs to the sky and to the high places. We belong to the earth, we are chickens."

You choose the ending. Either the eagle went on believing that it was a chicken, and so lived and died scratching for corn, or else he discovered his true identity, and learned to fly, high in the sky.

Imagine how those disciples felt on the first Easter morning, when they finally believed in the resurrection of Jesus.

They began the day huddled together in fear, terrified for their lives. They finished it by meeting with their risen Lord, suddenly aware that life would never be the same again.

Within weeks, they had a new confidence. They set out for the ends of the earth, and created a church that has endured, despite the efforts of Empires to stamp it and them out of existence. They had learned to fly! They went from being people afraid of dying, to people who offered their lives to help others come to the faith and joy that they had. Like Paul - and others who have since believed - they were transformed and changed because of the resurrection and their conviction that it was for them that it occurred.

The disciples were changed by their faith in the resurrection and in the God who brought it about: they were given power to heal and to help others; power to conquer their own fear and despair; and power to defeat the fear and despair that afflicts others.

This is what the resurrection is about, what our faith is about. God can bring back to life that which has died, God can bring good out of evil, love out of hate, and hope out of despair.

This is what we believe; and we believe it can make a difference. Our Easter faith is there for the taking. Do not be afraid. Live his risen life!

Praise be to God our Father who raises the dead to life,
Praise be to Jesus the Son who shares his life with the faithful,
and Praise be to the Spirit who makes one with him. Amen