

What is Resurrection for us?

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 4 April, 2021

Shared Reflections by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin and Rev Penny Jones

Easter Day B

Mark 16.1-8; John 20.1-18

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

Rev Penny

Loving God take our lips and speak through them. Take our minds and think through them, Take our hearts and set them on fire with love for you, now and forever. Amen

Well we've just heard two rather different stories haven't we. Two different stories of faith. And many other accounts, of course, exist of this story, the story of the resurrection and they cannot be conflated. So perhaps, the most important question of all is: *what does resurrection mean to us?* To me, to you, to each one of us here, and to all of us together.

Now that's not a question we can answer in a few moments of reflection. But we might answer it a little bit more fully over the next seven weeks or so of the Easter season. But Jo and I have decided we might enter into a little bit of a chat, a bit of a dialogue, that we hope will encourage us to open up that question in the days ahead. Because one thing that is very clear about Jesus' resurrection is that it is related through a multiplicity of stories and of symbols.

These come from people of different outlook and biblical outlook, and so they invite us to share our own experiences and our own insights into the resurrection, because resurrection is a reality that we experience every day, and we celebrate especially today. But it's not a simple fact is it, Jo? It's rather an invitation to see and to travel into deeper experience, deeper love, deeper mystery perhaps.

Rev Josephine

Yes I agree Penny. Do you remember years ago when we were in Melbourne, exploring the possibility of a call to ministry there with the wonderful Bishop Barbara Darling. We were introduced to another Assistant Bishop and he said, without any small talk, just very abruptly: *do you believe in the resurrection?*

What a question to ask a Christian, let alone an ordained Christian! It felt really quite aggressive and dismissive. What he really meant of course was: *do you believe in my version of the resurrection.* The underlying implication of course was that if you don't you're not a proper Christian - and maybe you're even a heretic to be shunned.

Now typically, that kind of version of resurrection is a little bit limited. And it revolves around particular materialistic conceptions. It's a bit like that question you get asked: *do you believe in God?* Before replying to that, I'm always wanting to ask: *well, tell me what kind of God do you believe in or not believe in? And what do they mean to you?*

Rev Penny

So I think, yes, the real living question about the resurrection is: *what does it mean to you? To us?* And that doesn't mean to say that some details of history and the events surrounding Jesus' death are not important to explore. Of course they are. But as with other aspects of Christian faith we should be clear that the gospels are inviting us into journeys of exploration - rather than providing definitive answers. Because, after all, the heart of resurrection is the extraordinary affirmation of the reality of the possibility of new life. Really unfathomable depth to that.

And perhaps that's why there are so many different stories. And that's another indication that we have something here that wasn't just kind of cooked up, but actually expressed a depth of experience. They spoke far beyond historic or scientific detail of that deep experience of love and of the deep mystery of resurrection life into which we're called.

Rev Josephine

So, Penny, which of the two different accounts we heard about Jesus' resurrection, we heard today, would you choose - if you could pick just one? And why?

Rev Penny

Only allowed one? Okay. Well tomorrow might be different, but today I'm going to go for Mark. I love Mark because it's, we believe, the first one written. And it's so immediate and I love the way that it ends so abruptly. Even shockingly, with the women saying nothing to anybody, because they were afraid. But we're all here today. So they did say something to someone. But I love that it ends - the Greek ends - on a preposition, the little word *gar*, meaning four, sort of ends up in the air.

I think that the gospel writer might even have intended to leave us with an open ending, refusing to have Jesus resurrection be tidy or simplistic to understand. But I'm guessing you have a different idea?

Rev Josephine

Well, yes Penny, I'm going to go for John today - until tomorrow. And I guess it might be different tomorrow. But, and especially because, I think the second half is really beautiful and really significant. The first part fantastic, but the second part is really beautiful. And that's because of its setting in a garden - which of course is a deliberate symbolic complement to the Garden of Eden at the beginning, where things, you know, mythologically fell apart.

And so it represents the renewed first day, or a new eighth day of divine creation. That's what resurrect... that's what every Sunday is, isn't it. A reminder of God's new creation. And I love the centrality of the women in the first story as well. I love the centrality of the woman, Mary of Magdala, and the way she glimpses - it takes her a while to work out the mystery of new life.

Rev Penny

Well I can see that, and I love it too. And that, of course, is why John's account shows Mary mistaking Jesus for the gardener, isn't it. It's a reminder that, spiritually speaking, we always have to look that bit deeper to see God. And I think faith is so often about discovering after getting lost, about glimpsing, rather than seeing everything clearly.

But I do think Mark's account shakes it up a bit more and it leaves a lot more room for imagination. I think some of the later accounts were around some other truths. And so those first disciples, I think, they took a while to work it all out. You know the three days is a symbolic thing. Let's have sort of 30 years. They took a long time to work it. And probably not in Jerusalem, but much later as Mark suggests, in Galilee. Because surely they must actually have been terrified, in every way grief stricken and not at all sure what this was all about.

Rev Josephine

Yes that makes sense to me. And I wonder what you feel? Which story speaks to you? Not just the ones we've heard today, but others. In some ways, for me today - and tomorrow it might be different - the gospel accounts, these two we've heard, are preferable to Matthew's, for example, which is quite a dramatic one, almost melodramatic. Sort of, if you're going to do a cartoon strip or something, you'd choose Matthew's story. And Luke's stories of resurrection also can be a little bit tidy sometimes. Although that story of the Emmaus road, which we will come to in a couple of weeks, is really gorgeous.

But all of them are ways of understanding. And I think we've got them so that each of us, at different times in our life and at different points, can understand the reality of resurrection afresh - especially when it's trying to escape from us. And they ring true, I believe, to the deepest levels of our experience. When we open our eyes and hearts like Mary of Magdala did, even in her fear and not knowing what was going on, to walk on. So life and light and joy, that's what the resurrection is saying, will break through even though we might have continuing scars and struggles.

Rev Penny

So that's why we have, just at the front here, seven golden circles this morning of resurrection. And for those of you who were here on Good Friday might remember, we had seven purple circles of suffering. And they represent the way in which, though suffering remains with us and some perhaps can never be transfigured wholly in this life, yet love still conquers all. And I think we see that in our own lives and bodies as much as in the lives and bodies of those we hear about in the scriptures. The writers wrote to proclaim this power of new life in their lives and their bodies and in the lives of those about whom they wrote because - we - all of us here today, are resurrection people.

As we look around and as we share today we are the best living witnesses to the resurrection, because it happens among us, as we trust in the possibilities of new life beyond those circles of suffering that we explored of ourselves, our families, our close relations our communities, our nation our world, our planet. Beyond all that suffering we witness to the power of life and resurrection.

Rev Josephine

So, I think, one of the things our gospels are trying to change, especially Mark, is to invite us to share our own resurrection stories. And they're all around us and in us too, aren't they. Our friend, Peter Miller, for example, (I know he was, for a while, a local minister here) wrote recently to share some of his story of how, struggling with cancer, he caught Covid19 - and thought that was the end. But through the care of others in hospital made it through.

And some of us may have seen that remarkable refugee Moz Azimitabar tell his story on TV this week, of how he went through year after year of danger and detention and yet shared and maintained extraordinary hope and care for others. David Attenborough, this week, told the story of mountain gorillas in Africa he thought had been made extinct. But through the strength of others' dedication and imagination, they've survived to offer hope for ecological suffering too.

And last week, the Transgender Day of Visibility reminded us of how gender diverse people, in a way, are in themselves signs of resurrection, because they're literally and metaphorically new creations whom others don't always believe. And in that sense, I think we're all, literally, resurrections where we bear our suffering and even with continuing scars witness to new life. So I invite you to think and to share those examples in the days ahead.

Rev Penny

I think we're going to have some stories to tell over morning tea, because there are so many stories of resurrection. That's why our bible has so many resurrection stories. You couldn't cram it all into one. It is, as another bishop we used to know used to say, in the face of rising fundamentalism and a refusal to listen to long-established biblical scholarship.

David Jenkins affirmed that *the resurrection is so much more than a conjuring trick with old bones*. But sadly his opponents and much of the media used to misrepresent him by reporting that he'd said that the story of the resurrection is merely a conjuring trick with old bones and claiming that he didn't believe in the resurrection at all. Well of course, what he was actually trying to do, was to open others eyes to how much bigger and how much more real is the resurrection as a whole. But sadly eyes and hearts are so easily closed to bigger pictures aren't they.

I remember David telling us a joke about this that sums it up rather well. I think you tell it better than me Jo.

Rev Josephine

You might have heard various versions of this in other places. A rabbi, an imam and a bishop - the bishop of Durham, David Jenkins, went rowing. Went rowing on a lake but lost their oars. What were they to do? After a while the rabbi jumped out on one side of the boat and swam powerfully to shore. And she was followed shortly after by the imam, who jumped out the same side and reached the shore to further applause. But what about Bishop David Jenkins? After a little while longer, he stepped out of the boat on the other side and walked over the water to shore. And what did the media have as their headline the next day? *The Bishop of Durham can't swim!*

Now how did he do it? We can ask that, can't we? How did God do this with Jesus? We could look for naturalistic explanations, such as stepping stones below the surface, if you really want to get into the joke.

But the real point, of course, as with Mary in the garden in John's story, or Mary's shocked disciples, is that we easily reduce life to our limited expectations and ideologies. In contrast, true resurrection calls us into recognizing and living into much bigger and deeper experience. Deeper love and deeper mystery.

Rev Penny

So then, maybe we need all those biblical stories of resurrection, both to keep us on our toes and to assure us that we will encounter God's new life, but in many different ways. Because ultimately the greatest story of resurrection is ourselves and all those who continue on this story. So let's open our eyes afresh and recognize Jesus, as John's Mary does, and take up the opportunity that Mark offers us to write our own resurrection endings - or rather beginnings - for others to take on.

Rev Josephine

Let's conclude, Penny, with your beautiful prayer we're going to use later, part of which sums up what we've tried to explore.

Touched by the light of new dawn	<i>Send us out to dispel the darkness</i>
Helped by your grace to look twice	<i>Send us out to see you in the stranger</i>
Nourished like seeds in rich earth	<i>Send us out to bring life to the world</i>
Rejoicing that death could not hold you	<i>Send us out to bring joy to the sorrowing</i>
Brushed by the wings of angels	<i>Send us out to proclaim the good news</i>

Amen