

Invitation to Resurrection

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 27 March 2016

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Easter Sunday C

Isaiah 65: 17-25; Luke 24: 1-12; Contemporary Reading

Hear the You Tube version as you read – follow the link on the Sunday Reflections page at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/>

Happy, Holy Easter!

Easter Sunday is the most significant day in the church's year. The day on which we celebrate the mystery of resurrection. And it is a mystery, to be grasped not by science, but by imagination.

The most important question is not "did it happen." The most important question is what does it mean? What does it mean for me? What does it mean for my life? What does it mean for our life together? Where is truth, even when facts are scarce? Many modern Christians insist on a framework of facts which are either accepted in totality or are rejected completely as being myth.

But a facts-based "either/or" approach will not enable us to experience resurrection. Resurrection is not something to be explained – and I'm not going to explain it! Rather, it is offered to us and we are invited to receive it. And when we have received we too are expected to live. To be alive!

The gospel stories of resurrection are not congruent. Details vary widely - in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The Gospels are far from clear as to what happened. It began in the dark. The stone had been rolled aside. Only Matthew tells of an earthquake. At the tomb there were two white-clad figures - or possibly one. Mary Magdalene seems to have arrived there before anybody else. There was a man she first thought was the gardener. Perhaps Mary the mother of James was with her and another woman named Joanna. One account says Peter came too with one of the other disciples. In Luke's gospel that we heard today, the suggestion is that there were only the women and that the disciples, who were somewhere else, didn't believe the women's story when they heard it - until Peter ran and saw for himself. There was the sound of people running, of voices. Matthew speaks of "great fear and joy." Confusion was everywhere. There is no agreement even about the role of Jesus himself. Did he appear at the tomb or only later? Where? To whom did he appear? What did he say? What did he do?

If the writers of the gospels and the compilers of the canon were trying to convince people about the facts, surely they would have got their stories straight. The accounts are fragmentary, shadowy and incomplete.... When it comes to working out what exactly happened, there can be no certainty. But that something unimaginable happened, of that there can be no doubt. And in the telling of these stories, they become our stories too.

The Irish philosopher and theologian Pete Rollins, in his book, *The Orthodox Heretic*, suggested it might help to imagine Christianity without resurrection stories...

Imagine, he writes, if some of Jesus disciples had left Jerusalem the day of the crucifixion and gone, with their hearts broken, to live far away. Imagine if they'd left before the women started to tell what they had been told, that Jesus was risen. Imagine they never heard about the resurrection appearances but instead made a commitment to live faithful to the way of Jesus, despite his death.

To live like this would be much more demanding than confessing belief in something you cannot see or prove. Resurrection would be something that is to be lived rather than believed.

For while there would be no intellectual affirmation of Christ's living presence, there would be an incarnated testimony to that presence. Here Jesus would be testified to as present in the lives and the actions of the community. This affirmation is not wrapped up in some abstract belief. It is testified to in the texture of their lives.

Rollins thinks that imagining this non-resurrection Christian community may cause us to rethink the necessity of believing in the resurrection. It might actually cause us to wonder whether belief in the resurrection can sometimes act as a barrier to affirming its reality. Especially when this belief is often presented as some kind of divine insurance policy to guarantee life in the here-after.

Perhaps Christians are not called to believe in the resurrection but rather called to be the place where the resurrection takes place, the site where Christ's presence is testified to in action.

To live like this is no easy task.

In an earlier blog, Pete Rollins says of himself:

"Without equivocation or hesitation I fully and completely admit that I deny the resurrection of Christ. This is something that anyone who knows me could tell you, and I am not afraid to say it publicly, no matter what some people may think..."

I deny the resurrection of Christ every time I do not serve at the feet of the oppressed, each day that I turn my back on the poor; I deny the resurrection of Christ when I close my ears to the cries of the downtrodden and lend my support to an unjust and corrupt system."

He goes on to say: *"However there are moments when I affirm that resurrection, few and far between as they are. I affirm it when I stand up for those who are forced to live on their knees, when I speak for those who have had their tongues torn out, when I cry for those who have no more tears left to shed."*

According to Rollins, you can believe all the things you want. You can be as religious as get out. But unless you can *"cry for those who have no more tears left to shed"*, the resurrection means little to nothing.

Nothing at all.

We live in a world of both Good Fridays and Easter Sundays. Easter Sunday does not deny Good Friday...

It's good to sing hallelujah as we have this morning. But resurrection life is not all hallelujahs. It's complicated, messy and often unjust.

Deepest despair and unbounded joy coexist alongside each other, every day... Easter Sunday doesn't mean the suffering is over, but it allows us to draw out hope from that which seemed hopeless.

Those imaginary Christians who didn't hear about the resurrection, continued to live with the pain of the world, but they lived through it in the hope that is the way of Jesus, a way that assured them of the love and presence of God with them through it all.

At Easter we commit again to living the way of Jesus, the way of forgiveness, of love, of justice. While we still have breath, and despite all the signs to the contrary, we seek gentle revolutions in ourselves and in the world.

Every single thing the resurrected Christ does on earth is now done through our bodies. The work of feeding, healing, forgiving, welcoming, loving is now our work because we have been healed and loved and forgiven.

Because we too have been raised from the dead. And we have been gifted with the grace that makes resurrection life possible.

So, as we celebrate this Easter, we acknowledge that all we have are the fragmentary stories, shaped and reshaped and told orally, by people of faith from generation to generation.

Just the stories that tell us:

That in the midst of brokenness, healing stirs.

That in the midst of darkness, a light shines.

That in the midst of death, life is breaking forth.

That when all seems lost, hope springs eternal.