

Swiss Church in London

Easter 2008

John 20,1-18

Dear friends

As I look around this Easter time, I see the many events playing out on the world stage at the moment. A few days ago, the 5th anniversary of the invasion in Iraq was celebrated by some and bemoaned by many. Kosovo has become an independent state declaring its independence from Serbia. The Tibetans protest against the Chinese Lords and jeopardise the Beijing Olympics and embarrass the many Western sponsors of the games. The stock markets plummet and the financial congregation is dithering – and with them the many house owners and credit card users who don't know how to repay their debt. We may be at the brink of recession or perhaps maybe even in a recession. Jittery times lie ahead.

They are all events that change the course of history. And as I watch, I wonder. I wonder what I am doing here in this pulpit. And then I am reminded of two things.

First, I am reminded that no event in history has shaped the world like the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And second I reminded of this simple fact about life. Life does not go on forever. There is an end, there is death. Every one of us must face our mortality. There is no military victory, no medical cure, no global village that can prepare any individual to answer the ultimate questions in life. And this morning I stand to proclaim Hope, the hope of His Resurrection. There is death. Yes. But life is in Jesus Christ, the hope of our resurrection.

Friends, you have come here this morning with a sense of anticipation. There are sobering questions on your mind and much hangs in the balance. Is there hope? Is there new life? Is there reason for joy? The answer to your questions has arrived this day. It is here waiting for you. It is a three-word message: Christ Is Risen! Good news for the depressed. Good news for those who have lost loved ones. Good news. Good news to those who have lost their joy, Christ is risen.

Consider with me this morning the implications of Easter.

First, the disciples were changed.

The most telling evidence of the resurrection is not the empty tomb but the transformation of the disciples. Their disappointment changed to exhilarating joy.

Their fear changed to an evangelical boldness. They assumed a new audacity. In less than two months they went from cowardly disciples who locked themselves behind closed doors for fear of the Jewish authorities, to courageous apostles who stood before the thousands in the presence of the Jewish authorities proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Some months ago a college student came by one afternoon to discuss theological issues. That sort of thing does not happen often, I must confess. I hope it will not disappoint you to hear that most of my days are spent in meetings and with budgets, and planning issues and reports and not discussing theology.

Eventually the conversation came around to the subject of Easter. After all, if you take Christianity seriously, it will ultimately always lead you to Easter. “What do you think of the resurrection, he asked. I replied: I believe that it happened. What is your evidence, he asked, like a professor prodding a student. I presented as Exhibit A: the disciples. Twelve men are not going to give up their lives to simply perpetuate that which they know to be a hoax.

“I don’t know,” he mumbled. “I just don’t know.” There was his problem. He was seeking knowledge, not faith. You do not say: resurrected Christ, appear to me and then I will believe. It is just the opposite. The resurrected Christ appeared only to those who did believe. The angel told the men: Go to Judea and there you will find him. I would suggest that Judea represents the community of believers. Judea was to be the place where Jesus would plainly reveal to his followers that he was indeed alive. He did not reveal himself to the Caiaphas and Pilates and Herods of the world.

There is no proof or evidence that can be offered. It is a matter of faith. But this was enough for the disciples. It changed their lives.

Secondly, because of the resurrection our view of death has changed.

When I was in Jerusalem a few years ago, I also visited the Holy Sepulchre Church, the Church in the centre of Jerusalem where Jesus was buried. I was quietly standing before the place where Jesus laid when I heard a group of Spanish teenagers entering the Church. They were laughing and shouting and my first inclination was that they were there simply to create trouble. Surprisingly, however, their moods changed inside the Church where they stood silently around the grave. Some of them broke out in tears. They embraced one another. Then they slowly got out of the Church. They came in joy and departed in sadness.

I could not help but think how that first Easter was different.

The women came in sorrow and left in joy. You see, because of Easter your whole view of death has forever changed. The Resurrection is the absolute bedrock of faith. Take it away, and you no longer have a church. As Paul said to the Corinthians: "If Christ has not been raised from the dead then your faith is in vain and our preaching is in vain. Not only that, we have been found to be misrepresenting God, for we testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead."

The resurrection affirms our instinctive conviction that death is not the end of a person's story. Your story is rooted in the heart of God. It is, of course, true, that a day shall come when we shall all die and enough time will ultimately pass that no living person will speak our name. But the resurrection affirms that God will always know our name and that he will never stop loving us. Simply because our hearts have stopped beating, does not mean the last chapter has been written. And so it is not death that we should fear, it is sin that we should fear. Death has been swallowed up in victory.

Even nature seems to want to scream out the loud news of resurrection at this time of the year. You cannot help but recognize the life that is all around. That which was dead, a seed, which fell to the earth and rotted, is alive again. Werner von Braun, the renowned atomic scientist, toward the end of his life, said, "Everything science has taught me--and continues to teach me--strengthens my belief in the continuity of our spiritual existence after death. Nothing disappears without a trace."

Thirdly, because of the resurrection, our view of Jesus has changed.

It is interesting that the story ends as it began. At the birth of Jesus the angel's message to the shepherds is: Be not afraid. When Mary comes to the tomb on that first Easter Sunday the message is: Be not afraid. We have come full circle.

But because of the resurrection, our whole understanding of God is different. Why? Because our understanding of Jesus is different. The one on the cross and the one who rose from the dead is none other than God incarnate. Jesus the Galilean is God in human form. Our judge has nail prints in his hands.

An Almighty God experiencing an all too human suffering. He is the door, the vine, the gate, the light of the world. No other can plead your case before God. No other is qualified to stand before God and do so. And how do I know this? One reason. He lives. It is the resurrection; because of the resurrection our whole understanding of Jesus is different.

In the winter of 1982 Vice the former Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev died. And the world was deeply moved by the silent protest carried out by Brezhnev's widow. She stood motionless by the coffin until seconds before it was closed. Then, just as the soldiers touched the lid, Brezhnev's wife performed an act of great courage and hope, a gesture that must surely rank as one of the most profound acts of civil disobedience ever committed: She reached down and made the sign of the cross on her husband's chest. There in the citadel of secular, atheistic power, the wife of the man who had run it all hoped that her husband was wrong. She hoped that there was another life, and that that life was best represented by Jesus who died on the cross, and that the same Jesus might yet have mercy on her husband.

You see, she knew that death was not the final word. Even though she had been told all her life by her husband and by the Kremlin that death was the end, she knew that there was One who was resurrected and she hoped her husband might be also.

Because of the resurrection we see the disciples differently. We see death differently. We see Jesus differently. Do not despair. The message that you have been waiting for has this day arrived. It is a three-word message: Christ Is Risen! Amen

Rev David Leuenberger