

EASTER SERMON

*University Church of St Mary the Virgin
17th April 2017*

THE REVD CHARLOTTE BANNISTER-PARKER

May I Speak in the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

A very warm welcome to you all this morning and particularly to the family, Godparent and friends of little Jaspar whom I shall have the deep honour and privilege of baptising.

Today we celebrate the rise of Jesus from the dead and seek to understand its significance. And to do so we have many symbols that try to point us in the right direction for the resurrection and its meaning in our Christian life.

For instance, we have eggs. The first eggs at Easter were birds' eggs as a symbol of rebirth and new life. They were painted bright colours to turn them into a gift and in the 20th century they started making them out of chocolate and can be the size of an ostrich egg!

The Easter bunny is used as a symbol because of its tie to spring and the promotion of fertility. Early missionaries harnessed pagan symbols and wove them into the context of Christian celebrations to help recruit non-believers to Christianity.

In deep contrast to the starkness and pain of the Good Friday service, the symbols within the church are joyful and celebratory. All the resources of the church come alive this Easter morning: the music, the beautiful flowers, the choir, the bells, the robes and colours are all brought back into our worship through our minds, hearts and vision and are used as a method of celebrating Christ's Resurrection; his risen body from the dead.

The symbol of light is a very important aspect of our church celebrations. At the beginning of the service, in the gallery, we dramatically set a fire alight from which the Easter Candle was lit and then as we descended from the gallery we spread that light from that candle out to all of you. Each of you has held this morning your own candle/light and we remember the words from John: "God is light and in him there is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5).

Also we have banged drums, shaken bells, crashed cymbals - this morning being one of the few times children are really encouraged to make a huge noise in church. We sing out the "Alleluia" which has been absent in Lent. We hear The Exultet, an Ancient Easter song of praise which is such a climax to this part of the liturgy and has helped us to celebrate the coming of Easter and the new dawn.

And specifically today, we use the symbolism of Baptism. Baptism and Easter have been closely linked from at least the end of the second century, the submersion in water representing our dying and shedding of all that is old and dead in our lives, and then rising again to embrace God's new life. And therefore it is appropriate that today we will celebrate the baptism of Jasper which also gives you a chance for you to re-affirm your own baptismal vows by taking a public declaration of your commitment to and union with Christ, both in his life and his resurrection.

And finally scripture gives us not only the record of Jesus' death and resurrection but also its meaning. What can we find in personal and beautiful account of Mary's wonderful encounter with the Risen Lord? Like Simon, Peter and John, Mary hurried through the dark and found the tomb empty. She was in pain, despairing and bereaved. She believed her master and teacher dead, she grieved for him thinking perhaps the body had been snatched.

So what changed for Mary on that first Easter morning? How did the resurrection become real for her?

Supposing Jesus to be the gardener, it was only when Jesus spoke her name "Mary" that she recognised him and knew that he was her Lord, alive again. "Rabbouni".

It is at that moment that the Resurrection becomes for her, not just a profound prophesy from Old Testament Scripture but a life-changing reality.

Mary by returning to the disciples becomes Jesus's first apostle - one who is so transformed by her encounter with Christ that she is empowered to bring the good news of the Risen Lord to the rest of the disciples. She goes back to them with that astounding statement: "I have seen the Lord".

Now I know for many here this morning that the bodily resurrection of our Lord Jesus is both challenging and baffling. I am not here today to persuade you one way or another but I shall give you some pointers from the great former Archbishop of Canterbury, Michael Ramsey.

Ramsey said, speaking to an Oxford audience in the Sheldonian, "I would suggest that, if it (what Mary and the disciples saw) was a 'vision' it was 'vision' created not from within themselves but by Jesus in his own objective impact on them. I would say also that if it was 'bodily', it was so 'bodily' with a big difference as belonging to a new order of existence."

So for Ramsey the Resurrection was "credible as being supernatural need but rationally congruous". For no matter how much of the laws of the physical universe we come to understand, a full knowledge of God, will to our limited minds, always remain outside our grasp. In the peace - we say "The peace of God - which passeth all understanding - acknowledging God's existence and majesty is beyond our total comprehension".

This concept is so well described in the hymn - *There's a Wideness to God's Mercy*:

*For the love of God is broader
than the measure of man's mind;
and the heart of the Eternal
is most wonderfully kind.*

(Words by Frederick William Faber, 1862)

The greatness and the “bigness” of the Lord is also simply put by C.S. Lewis in *Prince Caspian: The Return to Narnia* where the character Aslan is a representation of Jesus.

*“Aslan”, said Lucy, “you're bigger”.
“That is because you are older, little one”, answered he.
“Not because you are?”
“I am not. But every year you grow, you will find me bigger”.*

For most of us, if we can accept that the bigness/greatness of the Lord God then the Risen Jesus becomes more potent. We can perhaps all agree that beyond hope, beyond expectation and beyond understanding something happened over 2000 years ago that Easter morning which has changed the world and millions of lives for ever.

Millions of Christians hold onto that tenant. For without doubt something happened to change, what Ramsey called, the “debacle” and pain of Jesus nailed to the cross, to the triumphant Resurrection of the Lord and the birth of Christianity. The religious impact of Christianity on the world can never be underestimated: 1/3 of the world’s population are Christians.

Let us just contemplate for a moment this phenomenon. A human being who went around a tiny part of the world on foot, when 99 per cent of the world was illiterate, has for thousands of years been a dominant voice in our civilization. As the former Bishop of Oxford, John Pritchard, said “This man was in the public eye for less time that it takes an undergraduate to get a degree and yet he inspired countless millions of people to change their lives and the lives of nations”.

The very fact that you are present here today at St Mary’s means that you have a sense of the importance of this day to our fate, our lives and world.

Countless of saintly men and women have often shown us what it means to live with the knowledge of the Resurrected Christ; a Christ who says that, “Because I live, you shall live also”. To mention but a few, Jesus inspired Lord Shaftsbury as he championed social reform in the 19th century, Chard Varah who set up the Samaritans after a young girl took her life, Jean Vanier to establish the L’Arch communities for those with learning disabilities, Mother Teresa who cared for the abandoned and neglected in the streets of Calcutta, and the countless millions of “unhistoric” (as put by George Elliot) acts of kindness and good by men, women and children around the world that go unrecorded.

These men and women are not remote from the suffering of the world; they have experienced suffering themselves and understand pain, loss and grief. But they have felt called by their name to bring relief, compassion and care to those who suffer. By living in the pain of humanity they show a serenity and peace and they live out the meaning of the resurrection. Today, with the renewal of our baptismal vows, let us understand that real Christianity is not about just a personal commitment but it is also about making a difference in the world.

So this morning we should hear our name being called, have our eyes opened to new creation and our ears to new song. Let all our senses be awakened. The symbols of Easter will help us to transform the agony of the cross to the faith in the glory of the Risen Lord which we celebrate this blessed Easter morning. As this morning heralds a new dawn, let us look expectantly to the new day, new joys and new possibilities.

Amen.