St Mark’s 10.30 - 17/04/2022

**Easter Sunday**

**Sermon by Stephen Linton**

John 20: 1 – 18; Acts 10: 34 - 43

Good morning and happy Easter to you all. It’s good to be back with you on this great day in the Christian calendar, surely the most important day of all for Christians, the day when we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

But on that actual day 2000 years ago, the exact opposite was true for the disciples of Jesus. It was a day of mourning for their lost leader, so cynically rejected by their religious leaders and cruelly executed, on spurious legal grounds, by the Roman authorities. It was a day of fear for their lives: would they be next? And then a day of confusion, as the women who had visited the tomb at daybreak reported to the disciples that the body of Jesus was missing.

So Peter and another disciple, who is likely to have been John, the author of this Gospel, both ran to the tomb to see for themselves. And John describes a puzzling sight. The stone guarding the tomb’s entrance had been rolled away, and there was no body certainly, but just the graveclothes. And they were not in a disorderly heap, but just lying as they had been when the body that they contained was there, with the cloth that had been around the head lying separately: but the body itself had gone. Now if someone had moved the body for whatever reason, then the graveclothes would have gone too. What could this mean?

John tells us that they believed, but it’s not clear what they believed, as he writes that as yet they didn’t understand about the resurrection. And so they returned, leaving Mary weeping at the tomb. But then Mary encounters the risen Jesus. Through her tears she doesn’t recognise him, until he speaks her name: ‘Mary’. She cries out in astonishment as she recognises her Lord and master, ‘Rabboni’. And Jesus sends her back to tell the disciples, ‘I have seen the Lord’. And later that day we find Jesus himself visiting the fearful disciples, and then Thomas who had doubted the good news. ‘Peace be with you’, says Jesus. And he tells them that they will be messengers of this good news, once the Holy Spirit had come at Pentecost.

What a day! What a change, from fear for their lives, confusion, doubt, and desperation, to celebration, certainty, meaning, and a task to be done. That day changed their lives. Not that the future would be easy for them. They would face serious opposition, threats, imprisonment, and for some, death. But the resurrection of Jesus changed everything. The rest of their lives would be different, it was a new start, with a new message, a new certainty, a new mission.

And in our reading from Acts we see Peter fulfilling that mission. He has been summoned by Cornelius, the Roman centurion, to explain this new teaching. Cornelius was a devout God-fearing man, who wanted to know more. And Peter simply describes what had happened. ‘We are witnesses’ says Peter, ‘of everything Jesus did’. Jesus had been crucified by the authorities, but God had raised him from the dead. They had no doubts about that: they had met Jesus in person after the resurrection, and eaten and drunk with him. And Jesus had given them the task of spreading the good news: that God had sent him for this very purpose, and that through his death they could know forgiveness and a renewed right relationship with God.

Cornelius and his friends believed the good news and the Holy Spirit came upon them, as on the disciples at Pentecost. And Peter’s companions were amazed. Here were Gentiles, outside of God’s chosen people, who were now accepted by God on the same basis as they themselves, believing Jews. It was a seminal moment. They recognised now that God would accept everyone, Jews and Gentiles, on the basis of what Jesus had done. And the resurrection was the seal, the guarantee of all this.

So what does this say to us today? Firstly, on a personal level, it is good news for each one of us. Christ is risen, he is risen indeed, Alleluia! Today we are not commemorating a dead religious leader, yes, whose teachings we value and seek to follow, but who, like many other dead religious leaders, offers us no more than that: inspiring teaching, and a rule of life. No. Our conviction today is that we don’t just have that teaching and example to follow, but that we have a risen Saviour, who is with us by his Spirit even today in 2022. And just as for the disciples, that can turn fear into confidence, doubt into certainty, a life with no meaning or purpose into a life with meaning and a task to do: to spread the good news and to grow God’s kingdom.

And too, because of the death of Jesus, and guaranteed by God who raised him from the dead, we can each know God’s forgiveness and that our relationship with him is restored. As we sometimes sing, ‘Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven, who like me his praise can sing’.

And secondly, it is good news for the church. I think we are very much on the defensive at the moment. Nationally, following the pandemic, church attendance is down, especially so among young people. Some have lost the good habit of coming to church, which helps to maintain and grow our faith. And in recent years the media have happily reported our problems. Problems with safeguarding, and historic abuse that has been swept under the carpet, with the stories of victims ignored. Divisions over the ministry of women, and over sexuality. And perhaps a reluctance to speak out over national issues affecting our country.

But the resurrection should focus our minds on our mission, rather than our disagreements. We have a living Saviour who gives a meaning to our lives. A reason for living. A purpose and a hope, even when the international scene looks bleak. Christ is risen, he is risen indeed, Alleluia!

And for you here at St Mark’s, my brothers and sisters in Christ, this Easter is a new start. In 4 weeks, you will have a new vicar. That indeed is a new start. No doubt Gareth will have new ideas, and there will be changes. But it’s not just about having a new vicar, because you are the people of God here at St Mark’s, here in North Camp. What is God saying to you this Easter? How will you look to the future? It could be like those fearful disciples, ruminating on what might have been, regretting the loss of the past. Or it could be going forward in the power of the risen Christ to serve him right here, where he has placed you.

Over the last year I’ve been privileged to come and preach here, I think now 8 times. And I have been impressed by your faithfulness over this long vacancy, much longer than anticipated. So, dear friends, here’s the challenge. A new start. You are God’s people, inspired and empowered by the risen Christ, with a new task, a new challenge, and a new hope.

Christ is risen, he is risen indeed, Alleluia!

Let’s pray. Father thank you for your people here at St Mark’s, Farnborough. Help us all to recommit ourselves to serving you, just where you have placed us. Not in our own strength, but in the power of the risen Lord Jesus Christ, our Saviour. And Father, I pray for your church here, that they may grow in numbers and in confidence to serve you as you lead and guide and empower them, through your Holy Spirit. Amen.