

The Revd Jonathan Aitken Sermon for Easter Day Sunday 21 April 2019
St Matthew's Westminster, 20 Great Peter Street

THE REVD JONATHAN AITKEN SERMON

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ST. MATTHEW'S WESTMINSTER

LUKE 24: 1-12

As The Hallelujah Chorus Ends

Wow! Follow that! What a challenge for an Easter Sunday Sermon! So may I speak in the name of the living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

When Handel completed the Hallelujah chorus, he reportedly said to his servant:

"I think I did see all Heaven before me and the great God himself seated on His throne with His company of angels".

Handel's vision is a humbling reminder to preachers that God does not reach out to us only through the written or spoken word.

God also touches our hearts through silence, through the beauty of sun kissed nature, and through sublime music of the kind we are hearing at St Matthew's today and indeed have been hearing throughout Holy Week.

- From the plainsong chanting of our two Complines on Monday and Tuesday.
- Through the Tenebrae Service on Wednesday
- To the stunning Stabat Mater of Pergolesi on Good Friday
- To Stanford's Ye Choirs of New Jerusalem last night

And to this morning's Schubert and Handel, we have been blessed with a banquet of holy musical excellence.

So thank you Lord and thank you also to our choir, our musicians, our soloists, our organist and to Nigel our inspirational Director of Music. Let's give them all a grateful round of Easter applause!

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Of course it is right that we should be pulling out all the stops as organists say lifting all our hearts, hymns, bells and anthems to make the Welkin ring with our enjoyment of Easter Sunday, the most important festival of the Christian year.

Our joy is made complete because we've been greatly looking forward to Easter and preparing for it.

From church cleaning to choir practice and throughout the services of Holy Week we have been getting ready for today's jubilations.

However, amidst all today's spiritual pleasures there are also some spiritual paradoxes.

Alongside the Easter euphoria in this marvellous sunny weather we need to remember that there are shadows across our Christian world where tensions and tears co-exist uneasily with today's triumphalism.

To understand this we need look no further than this morning's Gospel reading, which describes in disconcertingly bleak detail the dawning of the first Easter Day. It makes a strange contrast to our festivities.

It is clear from Luke's account of the scene around the empty tomb on the inaugural Easter morning, that the atmosphere was one of: Fear,
Bewilderment,
Astonishment
And Confusion.

The women who were the first arrivals at the tomb were terrified. When they reported to the disciples what they had seen and heard they were treated dismissively for telling an "idle tale".

The English words "an idle tale" are a feeble translation of the original Greek language of the Gospels with which Luke the physician which uses a dramatic mental health term more accurately rendered as "deranged babblings".

To put it bluntly the first witnesses of the Resurrection were thought to be mad!

And spare a thought for the mental turmoil of Peter at the empty tomb. He had been warned by Jesus a few hours earlier that Satan was going to "sift him like wheat", but Peter had failed the sifting test disastrously.

He denied his Lord three times in the High Priest's courtyard, so he must have been in the depths of despair as he regretted and repented of his lies of denial.

But even after looking at the unoccupied burial clothes in the empty tomb Peter does not seem to have grasped the glory of the resurrection. In Luke's low key account Peter merely "went home amazed".

And if we read on further through all the Gospel accounts of the Resurrection, the initial mood among Jesus's followers was light years removed from the Hallelujah Chorus.

The Risen Christ was mistaken by Mary for the gardener.

The sorrowing walkers on the road to Emmaus failed to recognise him.

Doubting Thomas, quivering with fear behind locked doors along with the other disciples would not believe that his Lord and his God was alive until he had touched the holes in Jesus's pierced hands and side.

So the meaning of the Resurrection took quite a while to be understood.

But once the early Christian community "got it", Easter became the centrepiece of their worship – as it still is today.

And the resurrection became the litmus test of our faith.

That was why Paul wrote in his first epistle to the Corinthians:

"If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile".

Now I dare to suggest that the great Apostle could sometimes be rather too didactic.

I would not be surprised if there are people in this church today and in churches all over the world who may be attracted by our Easter celebrations but who haven't quite got there yet in terms of committed certainty that Christ has risen.

We should empathise and sympathise with their hesitations because they are in exactly the same boat as the disciples were on the first Easter.

The Disciples faith may have been faltering but it wasn't futile.

That's because, as many of us discover, a journey with the risen Christ takes time, hope, prayer and perseverance – and often involves periods of doubt, hesitation and pain.

So let's pose two challenging questions: What in our lives should we hope for, pray for and persevere with in this Easter season?

What is the life changing message of the Resurrection for us to follow here and now?

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Now of course there will only ever be one unique Resurrection, the one we celebrate today, that of God's raising his son Jesus Christ from the dead.

Yet surely it is still possible for us mortals to imitate Christ and to strive for little personal Godly resurrections in and around our own lives?

If so, how do we describe, how do we put into words, the purpose of our personal resurrections?

As an author who suffers from writer's block when searching for the right word I sometimes reach for Roget's Thesaurus, that 19th century encyclopaedia of synonyms and alternative expressions.

So when writing this sermon I turned up the word Resurrection in my Thesaurus and found these synonyms listed:

- Restoration
- Rebuilding
- Reawakening
- Reinvention
- Renewal
- Redemption

None of these words mean anything special if used in a purely secular sense. They don't begin to compare with what happened at the original Resurrection which was of course an act of God.

But if you put the adjective Godly in front of those secular synonyms the result is transformative.

To give a highly topical example:

Just think about:

A Godly Restoration

Or

A Godly Rebuilding

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Isn't that exactly what is about to happen with Notre-Dame in Paris?
Won't that be, in its way, a form of Resurrection rising from the ashes?

The symbolism here is powerful.

Fire destroys but it also purifies, cleanses and can lead to rebirth.
On the morning after the fire, pictures within the smouldering cathedral showed
that a golden cross on the altar had survived the blaze unharmed.

What a wonderful symbol of the Easter story – one of destruction followed by
hope.

And that same divinely inspired hope is also offered to the humblest of human
hearts.

For as we know God intervenes all the time to create little resurrections in
individual lives and situations.

To end on a personal note I shall never forget that 20 years ago at Eastertide
1999 I was one of the unhappiest people alive going through the nadir of a
downward spiral which I have described as:

- defeat
- disgrace
- divorce
- disaster
- bankruptcy

And jail

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But on this Easter Day as your ordained Deacon who will become a Priest in 70 days' time and as a prison chaplain I have never in my life felt happier or more fulfilled – thanks to God's Grace, helped by the prayers of this community at St Matthew's Westminster.

I hope I don't sound egotistical when I ask: Isn't this an example of a small personal resurrection?

So I finish this sermon on a note of joyful Easter gratitude.

First for our Lord's Glorious Resurrection.

And then for all the little personal resurrections he continues to grant to those who pray to him and follow him.

May I wish you all a Happy, Joyful and Blessed Easter.

Amen