

New Kilpatrick

Sermon

8th April 2018

John 20:19-31

Spirit... may we find the words that fill us with life... the stories that fill us with promise... and the silence that fills us with wonder... to inspire and shape us today... So be it... Amen

Conclave is the book club's book this month... We have a great book club in the congregation... We never really seem to run out of things to say... regardless of whether we've read the book or not... though I have to say I can quite often arrive not having read the book... I try... but as I sit in bed at night... it doesn't take long before the words blend into one another and I'm asleep... It would be nice if this was because I had no guilty conscience... but the truth is I'm exhausted feeling guilty about *everything*... how many people haven't been visited... the state of the church... Brexit negotiations... the economy... and the US presidency...

It's mad I know... but does anyone else worry about that stuff?...

This last week... however... I took a few days off... and managed to read this month's book without falling asleep... I don't know if it really helped my worries as it was about the fictional election of a future pope... and all the politics... foibles and weaknesses... and ultimate humanness of what we imagine to be sacred and holy... Around this conclave... cut off from all contact with the outside world in case it influences them... there is terrorism and all sorts of things... and those with the power feel very out of touch with those for whom religion... or faith... is meant to serve... hold... encourage... and love...

And while that story is purely fictitious... what it implies about religion... isn't...

And in the echo of Easter Day... the story of resurrection... of Jesus returning to life... feels somewhat out of touch... fictitious almost... for many... It is our central story... but in my experience... most people approach it with a dose of doubt... and see Thomas as their go-to character... who wondered and questioned what had happened... who was prepared to pause and think... rather than respond with an all or nothing acceptance of what sounds fictitious and unbelievable...

That's not how the Bible tells the resurrection story: all or nothing... We are offered a plethora of stories... that contrast... and indeed contradict each other... from upper rooms and doubting Thomas' to the Emmaus Road and Paul's Conversion... each very different...

In our era... when the stories all tie up... and all the evidence is consistent... our culture says... "This must be true... because everyone is saying the same thing"...

But in the era of these original stories... it was the opposite... The early church was more comfortable... with the diversity of witnesses to Jesus' resurrection...

Because the stories are not there to prove anything... To use the bible like some literal book of proofs... is probably heresy... The Bible is a library that collects people's experiences of the world... and when they don't have the words... they offer metaphors and pictures and stories...

For example... no one can explain quantum mechanics to me... I don't have the brain or the formulas... but you can give me a picture or metaphor of what it is like... then I get an idea of what it is like...

Faith works in much the same way for some... or I can't explain resurrection to you... but here's a story that offers something of the feelings others had when they encountered it...

So the greater the variety of stories about empty tombs and resurrection and Thomas in the upper room... the wider the breadth of experience we have of what resurrection is like... Resurrection can only be described from the experiences of others... It is always going to be bigger than we can describe... and certainly bigger than we can believe...

But ultimately... it still feels fictional to many... We have plenty of stories... but arguing for or against it feels decadent... almost irrelevant... irrelevant when you consider the real world... like those cardinals cut off from the world... while they vote for a Pope when all around them bombs are going off and things are happening...

It feels somewhat out of touch to those who worry about Brexit negotiations... trade wars... nerve agents... chemical weapons in Syria and the terrible things done in Yemen...

I wonder if for those who rise to the top in our world... resurrection has become little more than something we argue over... It doesn't affect our lives immediately... for those who are not winning in the world... resurrection is no side show... Resurrection is actually the hope of their ultimate vindication...

A minister called Morgan Guyton suggests... Jesus isn't some random deity... who comes back from the dead... For those who aren't winning in the world... Jesus is a poor, Palestinian, Jewish carpenter... who was executed for his audacity in challenging the religious establishment... and so resurrection... what happens to this poor, Palestinian, Jewish carpenter... speaks of the ultimate vindication of justice... hope... and love...

Jesus is the one who is under authority to Rome... the one who is chased out... marginalised... arrested... tortured... and killed... at the behest of someone else with power... and so resurrection becomes the most dramatic and vital image... that God is on the side of those... who don't get to win in the world...

And that is hugely important... for most of the people of the world... because increasingly most of the people of the world... are poor and enslaved to someone else's politics or world view... for the world feels like it is organised so that power and wealth is gathered more and more into fewer and fewer hands...

Indeed a report yesterday said that the most wealthy 1%... will have 65% of the world's wealth by 2030... and the consequences of that for democracy and government and society are enormous...

But the easter story... is the truth... that God is on the side of those who don't win... of those whose lives are fickle... cheap... poor... as Jesus' was... and resurrection... is the hope and the sign and belief... in their vindication... because resurrection... is the story where God... love... is on the side of those unjustly suffering... poor... and whose lives are under the power of others be they religious establishment... or political authority... as

Jesus was... and because he was brought back... resurrection is the vindication of all who... like Jesus... do not win in the world...

And that's why Thomas is so vital to us all... because there we have the moment... when all our confidence and power is halted... and where those who don't win... and who can't believe the possibility that they may indeed be vindicated... are given the affirmation... that no matter how terrible... or impossible... the circumstances are... God is on your side... and is overthrowing the world that privileges some... and marginalises others...

Resurrection is not for the privileged... Resurrection is not for believers... Resurrection is not for the powerful... or those who have won at the expense of others...

Resurrection is the sign... the promise... God's last word... that vindicates and restores those who have suffered unjustly like Jesus... It is not a fictitious story... or just a doctrine... or theological argument... resurrection does the opposite of isolate us and make us an irrelevance... for it puts us right at the centre of what is happening in the world... with a story of God who is on the side of those who do not tend to get to write history... in Yemen... Syria... the poor... the powerless...

If we want a stake in resurrection... we will find it in the company of those who do not win in the world... and for whom... and with whom... Jesus suffered... died... and rose again...

References

Morgan Guyton Easter is for people who aren't winning

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/mercynotsacrifice/2018/04/01/easter-is-for-people-who-arent-winning/#v8RpT04GIsB1GkxI.99>

Bruce Epperly An adventurous lectionary

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/livingaholyadventure/2018/03/the-adventurous-lectionary-easter-sunday-april-1-2018/>