**27th March 2016 Easter Day**

**Matthew 28.1-10, Acts 10.34-43**

It’s the start of British summertime today; in case you hadn’t noticed! Today is the day when the clocks go forward.

A few years back Easter Day also landed on the day the clocks went forward and I did a whole sermon on the theme of Easter day being a day when the clocks stopped. I’m not going to test you to see if you remember what I said.

I did start with the famous poem, Funeral Blues by W H Auden, made popular by its use in the film Four weddings and a funeral:

Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,   
Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,   
Silence the pianos and with muffled drum  
Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come.   
  
Let aeroplanes circle moaning overhead  
Scribbling on the sky the message He Is Dead,  
Put crepe bows round the white necks of the public doves,  
Let the traffic policemen wear black cotton gloves.   
  
He was my North, my South, my East and West,  
My working week and my Sunday rest,  
My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song;  
I thought that love would last for ever: I was wrong.  
  
The stars are not wanted now: put out every one;   
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun;   
Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood.  
For nothing now can ever come to any good.

It speaks of inconsolable grief – the loss of a great love. We have been through Good Friday, we have followed Jesus to the cross and recalled his suffering and shame and death and with it the despair and grief of his followers. The cross also touches our pain – as I said last week – it symbolises all that is wrong in the world, how unfair the world is, our sin, and suffering and death – like Jesus on the cross we may cry out ‘why? Why God? Yet today is a day when we glimpse light in the darkness and sense hope in our despair.

Today is a day when the clocks stop.

Normality does not continue... The cycle of life and death is interrupted. The fatality and meaninglessness of creation is transformed. A verdict has been given on whether there is any justice in life, whether there is any purpose to life, whether good will triumph, whether love is stronger than hate, light is stronger than darkness, life is stronger than death. Today is a day when God has given a verdict on those issues. Today is a day when the clocks have stopped.

That is how awesome and outrageous is the claim of the first Christians that Jesus had risen from the grave. The sight of an empty tomb stopped the clocks.

Whilst Matthew describes how earth shattering this event is, he also describes how an angel greets the two Mary’s who come to the tomb of Jesus on that first Easter Sunday. The angel says to the women four things that I briefly want to comment on this Easter Sunday: Do not be afraid; He is not here, he has risen; come and see; go and tell.

**Do not be afraid**

Do not be afraid were the first words the angel spoke on that Easter morning. There had been a violent earthquake, the stone blocking the tomb had been rolled away. The soldiers guarding the tomb were so afraid they shook and became like dead men. No doubt the women were shocked and afraid too. You would be as well. This is terrifying.

Images of terror have filled our TV screens this week again after the bombings in Brussels. Terrorism is a fact of life and Europe awaits the next act of violence from the jihadis. It would be human and normal to be in a state of anxiety. To be fearful of going to an airport, riding the tube, using public transport. But of course if people stop doing that, then fear wins and the terrorists have their victory. If Islamophobia increases, if there is a harsh treatment of those seeking asylum and refuge from countries where jihadis are causing the trouble, then fear wins, the terrorists have victory. It is fairly blatant that what the so called Islamic State wants is to provoke the West to be fearful of normal Muslims and discriminate against them thus causing more potential supporters to the jihadist cause.

Last week in reflecting on the cross, we considered how you defeat evil. The bible tells us to defeat evil by doing good. Christ on the cross absorbed the evil and used the force of love to break its vicious grip. What Islamic State fears most is for the West to continue to show tolerance and compassion to those seeking shelter from the atrocities caused by jihadists in other parts of the world.

Being fearful is understandable and also right. We need to be mindful of potential dangers and risks. But if we act out of fear we more often than not make the wrong knee jerk decisions.

When the angel tells the women ‘do not be afraid’ it is to reassure them that the resurrection is ultimately about joy and hope. There may be crucifixions and despair, pain and hardship to face but we are not left without hope. Even in the darkest moment the angel calls the women to trust. When we are afraid - remember the empty tomb.

**He is not here, He is risen**

The second thing the angel said was: He is not here, he has risen.

Jesus is not dead and is not to be looked for among the dead. He is alive and with his people.

When you walk around any church building which has no people in it, it may seem cold and lifeless. Some buildings may be more aesthetically pleasing than others but that is always subjective. Our tradition has always maintained that the church is the people. Jesus is alive and his Spirit lives in us. The Spirit of Jesus bring life and new life to individuals. The Spirit of Jesus is not confined to buildings. God is at work in our world, whether church buildings exist or not. Of course buildings can give a focus and a place to meet and work from. But they are not essential. God is not limited to a building. He is not here He is alive.

The greatest evidence for the resurrection of Jesus is you and me, testifying to his presence in our lives and his work in our lives.

Jesus was executed as a troublemaker by the Romans. Catholic priest and peace activist Philip Berrigan says that to proclaim that he is alive is the ultimate act of civil disobedience. When you’re executed by the state, you’re supposed to stay dead. Easter involves a faith that the God of love, the God of justice is ultimately in charge of this apparently unjust and often cruel world. The kingdom of God has broken in through Christ. The first fruits are all around us. We can catch glimpses of it all the time. We continue to pray for God’s kingdom to come and God’s will to be done on earth as it is in heaven.

**Come and See**

Thirdly the angel said to the women ‘come and see the place where he lay’. The women could check the evidence for themselves. The tomb was empty then and it is still empty today. It was an historical fact.

Earlier this week, comedian Ricky Gervais wrote in the Wall Street Journal his arguments for atheism and [why he thought he was a better Christian than many Christians](http://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2011/04/14/an-easter-message-from-ricky-gervais-why-im-an-excellent-christian/). In a follow-up essay, because this is America where Christians do get a voice, writer Lee Strobel offered his defence of Easter.[[1]](#endnote-1)

‘*It was the worst news I could get as an atheist: my agnostic wife had decided to become a Christian. Two words shot through my mind. The first was an expletive; the second was “divorce.”*

*I thought she was going to turn into a self-righteous holy roller. But over the following months, I was intrigued by the positive changes in her character and values. Finally, I decided to take my journalism and legal training (I was legal editor of the Chicago Tribune) and systematically investigate whether there was any credibility to Christianity.*

*Maybe, I figured, I could extricate her from this cult.*

*I quickly determined that the alleged resurrection of Jesus was the key. Anyone can claim to be divine, but if Jesus backed up his claim by returning from the dead, then that was awfully good evidence he was telling the truth.*

*For nearly two years, I explored the minutia of the historical data on whether Easter was myth or reality. I didn’t merely accept the New Testament at face value; I was determined only to consider facts that were well-supported historically. As my investigation unfolded, my atheism began to buckle.*

*Was Jesus really executed? In my opinion, the evidence is so strong that even atheist historian [Gerd Lüdemann](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gerd_L%C3%BCdemann" \t "_blank) said his death by crucifixion was “indisputable.”*

*Was Jesus’ tomb empty? Scholar William Lane Craig points out that its location was known to Christians and non-Christians alike. So if it hadn’t been empty, it would have been impossible for a movement founded on the resurrection to have exploded into existence in the same city where Jesus had been publicly executed just a few weeks before.*

*Besides, even Jesus’ opponents implicitly admitted the tomb was vacant by saying that his body had been stolen. But nobody had a motive for taking the body, especially the disciples. They wouldn’t have been willing to die brutal martyrs’ deaths if they knew this was all a lie.*

*Did anyone see Jesus alive again? I have identified at least eight ancient sources, both inside and outside the New Testament, that in my view confirm the apostles’ conviction that they encountered the resurrected Christ. Repeatedly, these sources stood strong when I tried to discredit them.*

*Could these encounters have been hallucinations? No way, experts told me. Hallucinations occur in individual brains, like dreams, yet, according to the Bible, Jesus appeared to groups of people on three different occasions – including 500 at once!*

*Was this some other sort of vision, perhaps prompted by the apostles’ grief over their leader’s execution? This wouldn’t explain the dramatic conversion of Saul, an opponent of Christians, or James, the once-sceptical half-brother of Jesus.*

*Neither was primed for a vision, yet each saw the risen Jesus and later died proclaiming he had appeared to him. Besides, if these were visions, the body would still have been in the tomb.*

*Was the resurrection simply the recasting of ancient mythology, akin to the fanciful tales of Osiris or Mithras? If you want to see a historian laugh out loud, bring up that kind of pop-culture nonsense.*

*One by one, my objections evaporated. I read books by sceptics, but their counter-arguments crumbled under the weight of the historical data. No wonder atheists so often come up short in scholarly debates over the resurrection.*

*In the end, after I had thoroughly investigated the matter, I reached an unexpected conclusion: it would actually take more faith to maintain my atheism than to become a follower of Jesus.*

*And that’s why I’m now celebrating my 30th Easter as a Christian. Not because of wishful thinking, the fear of death, or the need for a psychological crutch, but because of the facts.’*

Last July in my sabbatical we had the privilege of going to Jerusalem and we visited the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the site of the resurrection. Biblical scholars, historians and archaeologists almost unanimously agree this was the spot where the body of Jesus was laid and where the events of the resurrection took place.

The most convincing argument for the historicity of the site is the fact that the Jerusalem community of the first followers of Jesus held liturgical celebrations at the site until AD 66. That’s’ until AD 66, as early a date as you can imagine for a site in the Holy Land. The first Christians came back to this spot year in year out to stop and wonder at the amazing events that happened on the first Easter. So disturbed were the Romans by this that Emperor Hadrian filled in the stone quarry which was the site and built a Roman Temple on it. In the third century after the Roman Empire had been converted to Christianity the temple was abolished and the tomb reopened and a church built over it that has survived to this present day.

The present day tomb has a doorway made of marble carved to resemble folds of cloth, as if a curtain was overhanging the entrance. Folds of cloth of course were the only things on show in the empty tomb. The appearance of curtains being drawn back suggest an unveiling of a different reality.

When you enter the tomb you have to crouch down and then you see before you pinkish grey stone about waist high. On ledges around the stone, which also serves as an altar, dozens of tapers burn brightly. With your mind’s eye you can imagine Jesus lying on the stone and rising up. It is a spiritual experience being in there. He rose from here. He did it for everyone, past present and future. The millions of pilgrims who have come to this spot, touching this place. How it changes everything.

Of course this November I am leading a pilgrimage to that spot and to the Holy Land – the only time I will lead a pilgrimage to the Holy Land from this church. It promises to be a great experience and I’d encourage you if you are thinking about coming, to come. You will not regret it. As the angel said: ‘Come and See’.

If you are unsure about the resurrection, or belief in Christ: the invitation is ‘Come and See’. Check it out for yourself. Read, debate, ask, and seek.

For those of us who know the Lord is risen, whose lives have been changed by our encounter with Christ, the last part of the angel’s message applies to us: go quickly and tell.

**Go quickly and tell**

This is earth shattering news. An event that stopped the clocks and changed time and space. Risk the ridicule and opposition. Risk the bemusement and incredulity because this matters more than anything else. Jesus is Lord. He is the Resurrection and the life, the Way, the truth and the life: go quickly and tell.

I was most moved by something that Stephen Moore shared with us at the Churches Together meeting a few weeks ago regarding the Refugee crisis. Stephen has volunteered with the Aid Box Convoy organisation, based in Bristol who take aid to refugees in the camps in Calais and Dunkirk. He told the story of how most of the refugees in those camps are actually Christians, fleeing persecution back in their own lands. In the Jungle in Calais is a tent that Eritrean Christians have made into a church.

Eritrea has been described as the second worst place on earth for Christians to live, after North Korea. President Isaias Afewerki has been in power since the country’s independence in 1993 and there have been no elections since then. The country’s citizens are subject to mass surveillance and arbitrary arrest, causing them to live in constant fear. After reaching the age of about 16, boys and girls are called up for an indefinite period of military service that is effectively a form of slave labour.

Some Christian denominations are accepted by the government but Christians belonging to other denominations are not permitted to meet together, and are frequently arrested. There are an estimated 1,200 – 3,000 people currently in prison on religious grounds, most of them Christians. Some are held in solitary confinement and even metal containers (some of them underground), often ill-treated and subjected to torture in an attempt to force them to renounce Christianity. Forced disappearances and killings are widespread.

These Eritrean Christians who have fled and found themselves in Calais are sharing their Christian faith with other refugees in the camp, sharing their hope in Christ.

Stephen went to a church service in the tent and pinned up on the walls on the tent were the phrases: rejoice in hope, faith in adversity, constancy in prayer. The preacher was preaching on the good news of Jesus Christ and what it meant to the lives of Christians. He would frequently point to the slogans on the tent wall. The congregation would immediately respond ‘rejoice in hope, faith in adversity and constancy in prayer.’

Stephen said he was humbled by the faith of these Eritrean Christians who had suffered so much but who still shared in expectant faith and who rejoiced in hope, had faith in adversity and were constant in prayer.

The angel on that first Easter Day gave the message to us all: do not be afraid. He is not here He has risen. Come and See. Go and tell.

Alleluia Christ is risen He is risen indeed alleluia.

1. <http://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2011/04/16/how-easter-killed-my-faith-in-atheism/> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)