**31st March 2013 Easter Day**

**Mark 16.1-8, Acts 10.34-43**

It’s the start of British summertime today; in case you hadn’t noticed! It feels cold enough to be Christmas actually. I did think about choosing ‘In the bleak mid-winter’ as one of the hymns. Today was the day when the clocks went forward. But today is Easter day, a day when the clocks stopped.

There is 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.

Now of course in secular Britain the festival of Easter, the greatest of all the Christian festivals doesn’t even stop the shops from closing. Folk are apt to dismiss it as ‘just a story’, fishermen’s tales that got a bit out of hand – it’s had it time, we don’t believe it anymore.

There was programme on the TV this week about the ridiculing of Christianity in our culture. Cheap gags by stand-up comedians gets everyone laughing at our precious beliefs and further encourages ignorant and misinformed prejudices about what we believe. I’m sure we have all been there and been in that audience. The former Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey has waded into the debate accusing the government of supporting an aggressive secularising lobby in its marginalisation of our Christian faith. Well I leave that for you to debate – though personally I think he’s overstated the case.

I do know, however, that on the whole our society does think we are slightly crazy believing this stuff. Quite right actually because the stakes are high. If the resurrection happened then the clocks stopped.

I gave a talk at the FURY youth group the other week on what evidence there was for the gospels actually reporting what happened and not being fishermen’s tales that got out of hand? I said we are having a court case where you have to decide ‘Did the resurrection actually happen?’ I went on that it seems like today people are content to just dismiss it as a lie and a wishful thinking story. So let’s look at some of the arguments.

I used my notes from my recent talking faith session in the Old Spot – so if you want a copy I’m appy to supply you with them. I pounded them with arguments for the next hour. The power of eyewitness accounts, the psychology of eyewitness memory, can you trust testimony, corroborative evidence, rebuttal evidence, identity evidence, documentary evidence, consistency test, bias test, cover up test, corroboration test, adverse witness test, affirmation evidence, external evidence, circumstantial evidence, the conversion of skeptics, the changes to key social structures, the emergence of the church, and personal encounter.

Boy did I give it to them, They and I were exhausted by the time I’d finished. I apologised for my thorough examination in the matter but I said that whatever they make of evidence that I presented, and no evidence is ever going to compel or coerce faith – for that is the role of the Holy Spirit – I didn’t want them joining the crowd, the herd mentality, that ignorantly and prejudicially laughs off Christianity as a lie and just a story. I wanted to give them reasons to believe that the gospel witness is true and that we are dealing with history – something that happened – and something that changed history - that stopped the clocks.

The new Pope will speak from St Peters today near the spot where Peter is buried. Peter like all the first disciples of Jesus went to their death witnessing to the fact that Jesus had risen from the dead. All of them died for that belief. Would you die for a lie? I wouldn’t.

Of course the greatest obstacle to belief is the fact that dead men don’t rise. When you are dead you stay dead. It is absurd and outrageous to even believe anything else. That’s why I say today is a day when the clocks stopped.

David Hume the great Scottish Philosopher from the 18th century rejected the idea of miracles because they couldn’t be proven; they couldn’t be tested empirically, like a science experiment. The resurrection didn’t happen and couldn’t happen because resurrections don’t ever happen. The Church has always claimed that resurrections don’t happen, that Christ was the one and only time it has happened and that is why it is so unique and earth shattering and problematic.

Two of the greatest current historical Jesus scholars come to different conclusions. N T Wright, research Professor of New testament at St. Andrews University says that the proposal that Jesus was bodily raised from the dead possesses unrivalled power to explain the historical data at the heart of Christianity. He says this belief means that you have to rethink the whole world and even the way you know things.

Geza Vermes, Professor of Jewish Studies at Oxford University debunks all rival explanations for the resurrection but can’t bring himself to accept it because of the rational world of today. His main reason for rejecting the resurrection of Jesus has nothing to do with lack of evidence or with a credible alternative but simply because modern science had shown it was impossible. It boils down to this: if in our modern scientific rational age we can be absolutely certain that God doesn’t exist and miracles are impossible, then dead people don’t rise, so Jesus didn’t either.

The problem is that stuff does happen. Let me give you the amusing story of Mrs Clarke. On Tuesday 11 December 2007 under the headlines ‘we don’t do miracles’ the Daily Mail ran an extraordinary story about a woman called June Clarke. ‘Power of Prayer helps woman to walk again’, declared the subtitle incredulously. ‘yet officials refuse to stop her benefits’.

I am including this story because in the next few weeks benefit chaos will happen in this country as the housing benefit gets reformed by the bedroom tax and the universal benefit will be phased in. Millions will be affected and many will see their income reduced. A report by the Churches 'The Lies We Tell Ourselves’ sets out to talk honestly about the benefit system. The proportion of our tax bills spent on welfare has remained stable for the last 20 years. Although its convenient to believe that poverty is only visited on families that are lazy or make bad decisions and that benefits are generous or claimants are on the fiddle that’s just not generally true. Bit like dismissing the resurrection as just a big lie – you need to do some research first before you can make sweeping statements.

Anyway, back to Mrs Clarke a fifty six year old from Plymouth who had slipped on a wet floor at work seven years ago in the year 2000 and ended up damaging her spine with the result that she spent six years in a wheelchair. But at a Christian conference in 2006 she was prayed for and physically healed and within hours had folded up her wheelchair and stopped taking painkillers. After four months, having seen her doctor and realized that she was permanently cured, Mrs Clarke contacted the government’s industrial injury department, to tell them the good news that they no longer needed to pay her any benefits, because God had miraculously healed her. So far so good.

If that had been the end of the story I doubt it would have made the newspapers. What made Mrs Clarke’s case different, and what attracted the outraged Daily Mail and later the BBC covered the story and investigated the case, was the reaction of the government department, who in a moment of inspired bureaucracy refused to stop her incapacity benefits because ‘We haven’t got a button to push that says ‘miracle’.’ You couldn’t make this stuff up could you?

You see, because the permanent nature of her injury, she had been put on incapacity benefits for life, which meant the computer system at the benefit office was completely unable to cope with her miraculous healing, and she continued to receive payments that she felt she didn’t deserve.

You can just imagine it, some poor guy sitting in an office in Basingstoke. Rummaging around a database to see if ‘miracle’ is on their system, which it isn’t, and then contacting his supervisor, who also has no idea what to do with Mrs Clarke and her mysterious empty wheelchair, and tells him to get off the phone. Eventually Mrs Clarke went to consult a government doctor who declared her fully fit, and her payments were finally stopped. She has since been able to repay her debt by working full time as a carer.

Science can tell you how the laws of nature work and make very accurate predictions about what will happen next(except when it comes to the weather) but it can’t guarantee that there is no god, no creator, no intelligent being who can heal or raise people from the dead if He wants to. That’s just not what science is.

Of course you can ask the question if God healed Mrs Clarke why doesn’t he heal everyone with a spinal injury. If God raised Jesus from the dead why not raise everyone who has died? If we are talking about the Creator of the Universe it’s a bit strange to be so certain of what he should or shouldn’t do – we have to leave those things to God. It seems strange to say that God can’t heal Mrs Clarke or raise Jesus because he didn’t also heal Mrs Jones or raise Mr Smith and we think he should’ve. The bible calls miracles signs- signs of another reality, of God’s kingdom. It talks about Christ being raised as the first fruits of a new reality. First Christ, then one day us.

Without resurrection hope you are just left with tragedy and loss. Without resurrection you are just left with a purposeless world where there is no assurance that goodness is stronger than evil, love is stronger than hate, life is stronger than death. But we have God’s vindication of Jesus – that his way is right, that he is the way and the truth and the life. Resurrection matters despite all appearances in the world to the contrary. Victory is ours through him who loved us.

First Christ – the day the clocks stopped. But the clocks have kept ticking since that day awaiting the day when time will change and a new heaven and a new earth will come into being. Until then, the day the clocks stopped is a foretaste of that reality.

Joan and I went to see our oldest member this week. Doris Biddle is 97 years old, last time we looked anyway. She is in a nursing home and a little confused now. She remembered who Joan was but thought I was some new young minister. (I was flattered by the young bit!). But she did know it was Easter. She said she wants the Lord to come and take her, she is more than ready. Her faith was still radiant. She sang us the words to the hymn ‘Thine be the glory’ in the middle of the lounge. It was resurrection joy.

In the programme I mentioned this week about why Christianity is being made fun of in our culture at the moment, Ann Widecombe interviewed one stand-up comedian who told a good joke about Jesus. He adapted the much loved verse about the footprints in the sand. You know the one – where a person was walking with the Lord side by side and there are two sets of footprints in the sand. But when hard times and trials came there was only one set of footprints. And the person asked ‘where were you Lord at times like that?’ And the comedian said the Lord turned to the person and said at those times of trial and suffering I was there with you still. But we decided to hop!

Friends I wouldn’t for one moment want to trivialise the trials and hardship people go through – so hear me right. Life is changed by the resurrection. Whatever happens we have hope even in the darkest moment. The resurrection can put a spring in your step, a hop in your heart, like missing a beat. It’s a moment that changed history: that changed the world. A day the clocks stopped. We live in a new time zone. We live in God’s eternal spring. Victory is ours through him who loved us.

Forgive me poetry lovers: forgive me W H Auden:

Stop all the clocks, proclaim it overhead

He is alive. He is no longer dead

He is our North, our South, our East our West,

Because of Easter we have Sunday Best,

We thought that love would last for ever: we were right.

Evil, hate and darkness no longer have the might.

Always Hop skip and jump as well as you could

For all things in God will come to good.