**Easter Sunday**

**5th April 2015**

**Luke 24.1-11**

I am going to work backwards with three verses I want to highlight from Luke’s description of the resurrection.

1. ‘***But the story appeared to them to be nonsense, and they would not believe them’ verse 11***

In this week’s news David and Kathleen Long, won £1m on the Lottery for a second time. Apparently this was no April Fools prank. Remarkably the couple have remained living in their static caravan since their last win in 2013. David said that they were now going to enjoy the champagne lifestyle, though one of his daughters said he would be back on the John Smiths tomorrow. Asked whether riches brought happiness, he paused. “It’s got to, a’nt it?” he said in broad North Lincolnshire. But he admitted he had struggled since the win. “I think it’s the fact he’s got nothing to get up for in the morning,” his wife Kath added.

The press put the chances of winning the lottery twice at 283 billion to one.

[The Times looked at some other odds](http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/uk/article4399146.ece) - the chances of a monkey typing the word EuroMillions on a typewriter (191.5 quintillion to one); rolling 15 dice and every one of them coming up as a six (470 billion to one); But [a](http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/) cartoon on the front of the paper jokes that the Longs did have better odds than Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg holding on to his parliamentary seat. The Mirror notes there are better odds on Simon Cowell becoming prime minister and the royal baby being named Wayne

283 billion to one chance of winning the lottery twice. What odds on a man rising from the dead? Can you ever believe it ever happening? Could you ever believe that someone could win the lottery twice? David and Kathleen Long are your witnesses and for two thousand years the witness of the Christian church has been that, whatever the odds, Jesus was raised from the dead and is the Lord and saviour.

The claim wasn’t that he was a great teacher, a powerful healer, an inspiring leader or that he was the victim of a gross miscarriage of justice. All of those were true, but they wouldn’t add up to the early Christian faith and life. The first believers would not risk their lives and often paid with their lives over these issues, for claiming that Jesus had been bodily raised to life after being well and truly dead and buried. This is what they would eventually announce to a startled world. That is what we still dare to announce to a disbelieving world today.

Easter is perplexing, and to believe in the resurrection is not easy. The women who come to the tomb are perplexed from the beginning, and the apostles, when they hear the report of the women to them, consider it an “idle tale.” Or in our version ‘the story appeared to them to be nonsense, and they would not believe it. It is only later on that the apostles come to faith, and that is after Jesus appears to them as the story unfolds.

If you have your doubts you are in good company. The apostles doubted. But the Risen Christ in the gospel accounts is always gentle with doubters, with those who are so confused they cannot see Him. This is especially important today when so many Christians handle doubt and confusion with threats and expulsion. You can’t belong to the church if you have doubts. You can’t call yourself a true believer if you don’t agree with us.

See how the Risen Christ responds to doubt. He calls someone’s name. He shows. He explains. He welcomes, in such quiet ways are people invited to know the Risen one. God meets us where we are and understands the variety of ways in which disciples live out their faith. Maybe you deny God, like Peter. Maybe you speak to God personally like Mary, maybe you need concrete evidence like Thomas, or maybe like the beloved disciple you just simply believe, however you come to your belief God understands just as the Risen Jesus understands the disciples.

We live in a deeply cynical and sceptical society. Whilst there is such interest in history from celebrating anniversary’s such as the end of the Second World War next month and the Magna Carta in June, to historical dramas on TV from Wolf Hall to Poldark (Phoarr the women are now thinking of men scything the wheat) - whilst we do history in this country, we are selective of our history. Very little in our culture celebrates our Christian heritage.

Supermarkets were accused of an anti-Christian agenda after refusing to stock Easter Eggs with a religious message. The Real Easter Eggs were declined by Sainsbury’s and the Co Op as not credible. The company that made them said it is as if some feel Christianity is politically incorrect.

I know from talking to many people, especially young people that they regard the story of Jesus as made up, a fantasy, on a par with a fairy story, non-historical and just wishful thinking.

We are forgetting our history.

My mum has just been diagnosed this week as having dementia – it is no shock to my brother and I who have known this to be the case for a couple of years now, but now a person in a white coat has said so it is official. Many of you have cared and are caring for relatives who are coping with memory loss and who are a little disorientated in their everyday life. As a society we are in danger of memory loss as to our Christian faith and its rootedness in history.

The church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem is arguably the historical site of the death and tomb of Jesus. There are good archaeological reasons to support this. I went there 23 years ago and I’m looking forward to going back there in my Sabbatical this summer. The Tomb of Christ is housed in the aedicule, the church within a church. Impossibly ornate the entrance to the tomb is flanked by tall candles. Over the doorway the marble is carved to resemble the folds of cloth that the resurrected Christ left behind. You have to bend to go in and then you find a small room with a pinkish grey stone about waist high. On ledges around the stone are dozens of tapers burning brightly. I remember imagining Jesus lying on the stone and then sitting up. This could be the spot from which he rose. And he did it for everyone, past present and to come. And how it changed everything. And this is rooted in history.

Of course historical facts are not like scientific facts. They are always open to interpretation and debate and doubt. You cannot repeat the experiment and verify your results as you can in science – but history is no less true – stuff happens. But, like in a case of law, we depend on eye witnesses and the testimony of the leading figures and how the various testimonies line up.

1. ***“The women were Mary of Magdala, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James, and they, with the other women told these things to the apostles” (24:10).***

Each of the four Resurrection narratives goes its own way in details, but there are three elements that they all have in common: (1) the discovery of the empty tomb takes place on a Sunday morning; (2) Mary Magdalene is present at the tomb; and (3) the tomb is found to be empty. The differences in the accounts are fascinating and I would suggest give integrity to the essential nature of the resurrection claim. If you had four absolutely identical accounts of the resurrection the skeptic would smell something not right – that there was a collaboration of witnesses to falsify the claims.

In the case of Luke’s Gospel one of the most notable features is that it has the most women on the scene. Again this is remarkable because if Luke had been making this story up a generation or more after the event, as people sometimes suggest, not only would he not have had women going to the tomb (because women were not seen as credible witnesses in the ancient world, as this story bears out with the men’s reaction) he would have had the apostles believe the story at once, ready to be role models of faith to lead the young church.

Not so; it seemed to them a silly fantasy, exactly the sort of thing they will have thought, that you’d expect from a few women getting all emotional and crazy with grief and a lack of sleep. Like now, macho-ness and masculinity prides itself on being sceptical, reluctant to be committed and enthusiastic, more reserved, thoughtful, logical, anxious about being seen as gullible and conned. They eventually find faith after Jesus shows up in person to them. Often a direct encounter with God is what is needed to hit men between the eyes and carry them kicking and screaming into discipleship.

Women are the first apostles, the ones God deems worthy of sharing the news with first of all by sending angels to tell them what has happened. It’s the women who get it. Thank God the Anglican Church has finally got a significant woman bishop and she is on our patch – Bishop of Gloucester, Bishop Rachel.

Easter marks a moment in time when God raised the lifeless body of Jesus from death to life, thus vindicating all that Jesus taught and did in his earthly ministry. Stuff about forgiveness, about loving your enemies, about dying to self. He was ridiculed then for being out of touch and not offering a sensible way to live your life and get on in the world. He was put to death as a loser. But the resurrection turns this on is head. God says He is no loser – He is the Way the Truth and the Life – follow Him.

Jesus way was a ministry of inclusion, not only of women (so prominent in the story), but also of Gentiles (2:30-32; 13:29; 14:15-24) and persons regarded by the majority as sinners and losers. .

We always have a tendency to divide the world up: who is in or out, who is with us or against us - whether that is along racial, ethnic, and gender lines and more. Immigration will be a huge issue in this General Election – who is in and how we can keep others out; who can use the NHS and who can’t! Some of that is inevitable and can be for good purposes. But there is a downside to it too. The divisions that people make between the respectable and the disgraceful, the good and the bad, or saints and sinners can be particularly troublesome. Such judgments are often unfair.

The problem that Jesus faced was that some people were written off as sinners, as losers – not hard working families - because they did not measure up to standards that those who thought of themselves as righteous had set up. They were therefore to be avoided. Jesus sought to break down the false barriers and became a friend of those considered to be sinners. Respect for all, and a welcome for all, is the legacy that Jesus has given to his church.

When will we see beyond the outward appearances to the heart –to whether the person is a spirit filled follower of Jesus? Easter marks the beginning of a new creation. As the apostle Paul put it, “whoever is in Christ is a new creation” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

The church at its best continues to be the community of the new creation in a world that is too often headed for dissolution by violence, abuse, death, and destruction. Being people of the resurrected Lord Jesus, the church is in the business of praying for the renewal of the world. We look for new life not the ways of death

1. ***The angels said ‘why search among the dead for one who is alive’***

***Better translation would be ‘why do look for the living among the dead?’***

Last week Islamist gunmen ran amok on a Kenyan university. They tried to separate out Christians from Muslims and shot or beheaded the Christians. Over 150 were killed. They died and yet they will live – for in the light of the resurrection -what have we to fear - death where is your victory?

In our Reform magazine is an article about a Christian holding onto faith in Irbil, Iraq despite the threat from Isis.

The conflict in Syria entered its fifth year last Sunday. There is still no end in sight**.** Since 15 March 2011, over 200,000 people have been killed and eleven million displaced. The Christian population is being targeted now by Islamists.

Open Doors is an organisation supporting the persecuted church which is celebrating its sixtieth anniversary after Brother Andrew smuggled bibles into Soviet Union. On their website are videos of the testimonies of Syrian Christians and stories.

Heroes like [**Pastor Boutros\***](http://www.opendoorsuk.org/news/stories/syria_150310.php), who is an inspiration to so many both inside and outside Syria. Pastor Boutros is able to support 2,180 families in Syria.

"We do monthly food distributions. We visit [the families] in the places they stay and see what they have and we see what they need. We have a relationship with the people; there is real communication between us. We are not just giving food or cash. During the visits the people hear the Gospel, hear the Word of God. We also visit the sick; we pray for them and try to help with their medical needs.

"Having this relationship with the people is the solution to the problems in Syria. Peace comes only through Jesus. When people hear about the problems, they want revenge, but the church is doing the work of reconciliation.

"The church is offering something entirely different: joy and hope. People are praying, going out in the streets. I pray with [them] to commit their lives to Christ. I see people who were in despair and have hope again. We are seeing how happy and joyful people are because someone came and visited them and asked about them...

"The church today is like a tent that cares for those beneath her. Like a hospital that heals those inside her. And the most important thing is that the church is like a family for those who feel strange in their own country,"

Remember those who dare to bear witness to the risen Jesus and resurrection hope. Who are more interested in the ways that bring life, than the ways that lead to death.

Belief in the resurrection of Jesus is more than saying yes to the claim made by the women and, eventually, the men in the Easter story. It is at the same time saying “no” to the power of death and destruction that surrounds us. In place of the bad news we hear and the bad experiences we have, we make the claim that there is a sustaining power, God, who brings life out of death and reconciliation out of conflict, as the Bible tells us.

There has been marvellous testimony through the ages that that is so, beginning with the earliest witnesses of Easter. To commit ourselves to their claim opens the door to new life for ourselves and for acts of love and reconciliation in the world. We don’t hang around the dead – we are about life, new life, resurrection life.

James Martin writes about how he was a hospital chaplain and one woman he knew named Doris was confined to a wheelchair. When he had suggested to her that Jesus too had suffered she had shot back curtly ‘he only had three hours on the cross’. But later she surprised him. She said she used to think about her chair as a cross, which would have been his reaction. But lately she had started to see it as her resurrection. ‘My wheelchair helps me get around; she said. ‘Without it I wouldn’t be able to do anything. Life would be so dull without it’.

Doris’ cross led to her highly personal resurrection. It was a reminder that where the world sees only the cross, the Christian sees the possibility of something else.

Nothing is impossible for God. Often we find ourselves incapable of believing that God may have new life in store for us. ‘Nothing can change’ we say. ‘There is no hope’. This is when we end up mired in despair which can sometimes be a reflection of ride. That is we think that we know better than God. It is a way of saying, ‘God does not have the power to change this situation’. What a dark and dangerous path is despair; far darker than death.

How many of us believe our lives are dead? How many of us believe that parts of our family, our community, our world, our church, cannot come back to life. We look for the dead instead of looking for the living. With God -always look for the living.

The resurrection is not nonsense – this is history – let’s not forget.

The resurrection of Jesus creates a new humanity, inclusive and open to all

We pray and work and witness for the renewing of God’s creation – we don’t look for the ways of death but look for new life.

May God bless us all with renewed faith in the power of the resurrection, that like the firs women we will go out and share this great news in word and deed.

<http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1581> [**Arland J. Hultgren**](http://www.workingpreacher.org/profile/default.aspx?uid=c83532141124368bc3b73a21cdd7dd6045a4ad5f2b04660fa53cd9e2051c2dd8) **Professor Emeritus of New Testament** Luther Seminary St. Paul, MN

James Martin: Jesus a Pilgrimmmage, Harper One 2014