**Easter Sunday April 20th 2014**

**Matthew 28.1-10**

A few days ago I visited an elderly gentleman in a nursing home. In his nineties, his eyesight was falling, he was virtually deaf, and he was incontinent and could hardly stand up, never mind walk. I came to bring him Easter greetings – though saying ‘Happy Easter’ to a person in such a pitiful state could on the face of it sound tasteless. I gave him a crème egg and a palm cross. Hardly able to see he felt the palm cross and clasped it with all the strength he could muster. And then he brought it to his lips and kissed it and then held it to his chest. We didn’t need to speak. We didn’t need words. Though to be honest in my mind the words to the hymn Rock of ages sounded off: ‘*nothing in my hand I bring , simply to the cross I cling, naked, come to thee for dress, helpless, look to thee for grace; foul I to the fountain fly; wash me Saviour, or I die’*.

The women went to a tomb on that first Easter Day and found an angel who tells them that Jesus is not there, he is risen and that they need to go and tell his male disciples to go to Galilee to see him there. F**rom what the angel had told these women they would have expected that no one would see Jesus until the appointment in Galilee. But as they go on their way suddenly Jesus greets them. Matthew writes that they came up to him, clasped his feet, kneeling before him.**

**They held on to Jesus. They clasped his feet.**

**Two things I want to reflect on this morning: clasping on to Jesus and seeing him in Galilee.**

**What are you holding on to in life?**

Earlier this week, an old couple received a phone call from their son who lives far away. The son said he was sorry, but he wouldn't be able to come for a visit over the holidays after all. "The grandkids say hello." They assured him that they understood, but when they hung up the phone they didn't dare look at each other.

Earlier this week, a woman was called into her supervisor's office to hear that times are hard for the company and they had to let her go. "So sorry." She cleaned out her desk, packed away her hopes for getting ahead, and wondered what she would tell her kids.

Earlier this week, someone received terrible news from a physician. Someone else heard the words, "I don't love you anymore." Earlier this week, someone's hope was crucified. Earlier this week hundreds of parents lost their children in a ferry disaster. And the darkness is overwhelming.

No one is ever ready to encounter Easter until he or she has spent time in the dark place where hope cannot be seen. Easter is the last thing we are expecting. And that is why it terrifies us. This day is not about bunnies, springtime and girls in cute new dresses. It's about more hope than we can handle.[[1]](#endnote-1)

But the women on that first Easter Day have got their hands on Jesus. They are clinging on to him. He was dead but now he is alive. He has risen.

In Matthew’s account of the resurrection there is an earthquake – the resurrection is literally earth shattering – it is a seismic shift in human history.

**The central claim of the early church was that Jesus of Nazareth had been raised from the dead. The central claim was not that he was a great teacher, a powerful healer, an inspiring leader, or that he was the victim of a gross miscarriage of justice – no matter how many academic and fictional writers try to rewrite history in their portrayal of Jesus. The crucial fact that the first Christians believed, was that Jesus had been bodily raised to life after being well and truly dead and buried. This is what they announced to a startled world, the world of the Jews and the Gentiles.**

If you had been living in the Roman Empire in the first century, you would have noticed a strange custom practiced by the Christians. They would go out to their graveyards with laurel wreaths, the wreaths that had been used in Greek and Roman culture to crown the victors of athletic contests. They would take those laurel wreaths and place them on the graves. If you had asked them why, they would say, "Because we believe that in Jesus Christ we have received victory over the power of death."[[2]](#endnote-2)

**Don’t be fooled by the idea that modern science has disproved the resurrection of Jesus. Modern science has done no such thing. Everybody in the ancient world, just like everybody in the modern world, knew perfectly well that dead people don’t get resurrected. It doesn’t take Einstein to prove that; just universal observation of universal facts. The Christian belief is not that some people sometimes get raised from the dead, and that Jesus happens to be one of them. It is precisely that people don’t ever get raised from the dead, but that something new has happened in and through Jesus which has blown a hole through previous observations.**

**No resurrection and Jesus would have been largely forgotten in history. At this time of year in the football season when the issues of promotion and relegation are settled, oh please may it be settled soon…, no one remembers the losers, and it’s only the winners. If the story of Jesus had ended on the cross you would say gallant loser, said some deep things, loved people, great teacher, though a bit deluded, and finally the powers of the authorities, the powers of evil, the power of death won through in the end.**

**And like the thousands of others who were crucified, like Spartacus for example, Jesus would have been a footnote in history.**

**But that is not the case. The earthquake happened and Jesus was vindicated and proclaimed to be the victor. It matters because we can feel as though life is destined for defeat, for despair, suffering, and death. But resurrection says there is a last word.**

**And my man in the nursing home knew that. That’s why he kissed his palm cross.**

**What are you clasping hold of?**

**The women when they realised that Jesus had risen and that he was standing before them, knelt at his feet and clasped hold of them.**

**I have got terrible feet. They are big and smelly and have awful toenails – which are partly down to genetics – my mother has bad toenails, and partly down to too much football. I’m glad when Maundy Thursday – as a minster I can wash other people’s feet and avoid getting mine washed.**

**Feet turn up in the gospels on a number of occasions. In all the gospels there is the account of how Jesus is anointed by a woman while he is at dinner. The woman anoints his feet with an expensive perfume and then dries his feet with her hair. It is described as a loving act though it raises criticism from onlookers. Some say it is a waste of god money which could have been used on the poor. Some religious people suggest that the woman is a bad woman which prompts Jesus to discuss forgiveness – and those who have been forgiven much love much and vice versa. All commentators agree that it is an unusual act that shows great love and devotion. Respectable women wouldn’t let their hair down in public so there is a bit of scandal connected to it.**

**And finally it shows humility because anything to do with feet was the job of the lowliest servants. Which of course reminds us of the most famous story of Jesus and feet – namely the washing of his disciple’s feet, as the servant of all, and his commandment to love one another as he has loved them.**

**At his crucifixion, Jesus feet are nailed to the cross. Like Doubting Thomas, perhaps the women are checking the wounds of Christ to ensure he is the right one?**

**There is evidence in the ancient near east of how great kings had subject kings bringing them tribute and bending down and kissing their feet. Perhaps symbolically taking hold of Jesus feet the women were recognising Jesus’ kingship, that they had come to recognise that he was more than a mere mortal. However much or little they had understood who he was before, the fact that he was now risen from the dead made it clear to them that he was more than a mere man. So they prostrated themselves before him and held his feet. In doing this Matthew emphasizes that Jesus risen body was a real body and not just a vision or apparition. The women worshipped him – they recognised Jesus as divine.**

**Maybe you are not sure who Jesus is? Can you be bothered to clasp hold of this message with two hands and wrestle with it? Do you want it to be true? Are you desperate enough for it to be true? I could give you umpteen books to read on Christianity, science, reason, history and all that. But can you be bothered to read and investigate? Will you clasp hold of the resurrection?**

**Maybe you are wandering away from your faith in Jesus – other distractions, other interests – you are loosening your grip - what are you holding on to in life?**

**Life may be tough for you at the moment, your faith may be tested – your faith may be struggling – can you hold on?**

**But maybe you can hold on too tightly?**

**Perhaps these women are clasping the feet of Jesus to stop him from moving on – a bit like a first century rugby tackle. Bring the man down so that he can’t run away. John in his gospel of course has Jesus telling Mary not to hold on to him because he has not yet returned to his father in heaven. They don’t want him floating off into the sky. Anchor him to the spot!**

**Some people can make their faith like a monument – fixed and static. Something to look at now and again – but not of any significance for their day to day life. It's there in the corner – fixed – but it’s not going to move. It’s not going to disturb you. It’s not going to threaten you.**

**Jesus can’t be pinned down by these women. I’m going on ahead. I’m going to galilee – see me there. Keep moving. Faith is journey. It is change. It is new scenes. It is new adventures. Don’t clasp hold of me too tightly.**

**I knew someone who lost their faith and then re-found their faith many years later. But actually they lost an old faith, a belief in a particular type of God and how Christianity and the church should be – they lost that faith – but they rediscovered a new faith – in a different view of God and who Jesus was and what grace and forgiveness was about. We can hold on too tightly to our Jesus and squeeze the Spirit out of him.**

**Jesus says don’t be afraid. Don’t be afraid. There should be no fear in true faith.**

**But then Jesus says to the women: ‘go and take word to my brothers that they are to leave for Galilee. They will see me there’.**

**Why go to Galilee to meet Jesus? Why doesn’t Jesus just pop in to see the boys in Jerusalem. Why go all the way to Galilee to meet up with him?**

**Andrew Mayes**[[3]](#endnote-3) **in an article in this month’s Reform magazine discusses this very question about why the risen Christ insists on leading his followers back to galilee. He says that Jesus will not be found in Jerusalem, the religious capital, the centre of the religious establishment, where the divine presence was expected to be located. Rather the risen Christ is to be discovered in remote Galilee, the place on the periphery, the margins.**

**Galilee region was a much more mixed in terms of Jew and Gentile populations than other regions of the land. It was exposed to foreign countries and ethnicities. It maintained a physical and critical distance from Jerusalem and the self-serving religious elite. It was on the edge. Galileans were mocked for their regional northern accents – by Eck! Recall the girl’s recognition of Peter’s Galilean tongue when he denied Jesus three times. They were jeered: can anything good come out of Nazareth? They are all thick up north! They were looked down upon and dehumanised.**

**It was a place of deep poverty, crippled by heavy taxes and burdened by debt, caught in a downward economic spiral. It was a hotbed of protesters and rebels.**

**Jesus says I will go before you to Galilee and there you will see me?**

**I will meet you on the margins. In the places of need and protest. I will meet you in the places that need healing and encouragement. I will be found among the poor, the broken, the rejected, the stigmatised and hurting. I wait for you in situations of injustice and dehumanisation. There I will meet you.**

**I have often found the people with the liveliest and most vibrant faith, those people who are in those areas of life. Even within this church those who are on those edges, working with those who have learning disabilities, those whose families are separating and in crisis, those in financial difficulty and needing support through food banks; you seem in a mysterious way to be more aware of the risen Christ and the need for real hope.**

**Work will soon start on redeveloping our Parsonage on the back of this church to become Dursley’s new youth centre. The town council are investing about £300, 000 into the building. But we are not getting a free lunch – it is costing us too to be part of this venture – currently to the tune of £90,000. That is money that we barely have – and we still need donations and help and pledges to realise to meet this target.**

**Our recent church meeting had to make the decision to go ahead with this partnership despite the costs more than doubling. I would well have understood had there been serious concerns and reservations and cries of we can’t afford it. I’m sure there may be some private concerns about the cost – that would be natural. Steps of faith are always risky – that comes with the definition. But the church meeting voted unanimously to go forward. The decision took my breath away.**

**I know part of that money is for our own needs – we will start the rehabilitation of the upper halls by installing central heating throughout and totally rewiring those rooms: remember the wiring for the stage and lighting box had been condemned. It is an essential first step before we can start to consider new kitchen, staging and lifts. But half of the money is also our commitment to the people of the town, and especially the young people in this community.**

**This work will take us more into the heart of our town. It will push us out to the margins and edges. It will give us the place to meet with those hurting, rejected, broken or stigmatised. And in that place, and in this Parsonage, we can expect to meet the risen Christ, we can expect Jesus to be around, we can expect hope to fester and grace to be smelt.**

**The Parsonage is a dead and decaying tomb at the moment. But like those disciples told to wait and go to Galilee and see, we will need to be patient but we will meet the risen Lord in that place. It will be our story of resurrection.**

**Those disciples had deserted Jesus at his moment of need. Peter had denied him three times. Judas tragically had committed suicide. We may feel unworthy failures to be a part of this adventure with the risen Lord. But listen to the tone of Jesus voice: ‘do not be afraid – call my brothers – it’s not calling them deserters and good for nothings – its call my brothers> they have nothing to worry about – Jesus is going to restore and renew them. But they still have to turn up. They still have to turn up to Galilee.**

**Clasp hold of the Easter message. Go to Galilee and see the risen Christ. Don’t be afraid. He has been raised from the dead. Alleluia Christ is risen. He is risen indeed alleluia.**

1. Craig Barnes, Saviour at Large, article in The Christian Century, March 13-20, 2002 p. 16.
 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Mark Trotter, Collected Sermons, [www.Sermons.com](http://r20.rs6.net/tn.jsp?f=001s8ULUMcK2DoschhgXwp4jzBvZLvkhGKWhl-jvJYfRge3KqFFbtuTsD0RsYpnX2hWa3hOjcNXjYlmJCXlenP3nLyeSfLBnvqZk_nSKTQzPjcOPeDq4CYhc6MEP4pPGoRF7s74zaYsdk7QcTXxalohZZzZCWqVYVKpzrkUs8PYMps=&c=oumQCxKJRnIw5r0_DjWZ0fYINhQ20XFsR6JM9HcC4lE8nhrwkJq8lg==&ch=LnOMiJULGC_TZsQgjiSlo_Hp4A2vTHeJRR1h6_WbVn5BQVyPc2qFVA==) [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. A. Mayes Reform Magazine, April 2014, extracts from ‘Beyond the Edge, SPCK. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)