

God of Surprises

Easter Sermon message by the Rev Derek Lightbourne All Saints Belmont and St Albans Pauatahanui

Keynote Bible Reading: Matthew 28.1 - 10, Acts 10.34 - 43

The theme of the sermon this Easter morning is about surprises – those unexpected serendipity events that occur when we least expect them. Numbers of my surprises have been in experiencing creation, and in particular the beauty and awesomeness of birdlife. Fortunately, I've been able to photograph what is fleetingly seen, as most birds hardly pose for their photo. [So may I introduce the sermon with sharing a few: kotuku white heron, kakariki, hoiho yellow eyed penguin, king penguin and toroa albatross.

Today's gospel is very much about surprises - Overall the passage might be titled '*Experiencing Resurrection.*' The gospel story of Easter morning was of surprises, marked by the: 'And suddenly....' An earthquake – the two Mary's we're told had gone to see the tomb, 'and suddenly Jesus met them and said, Greetings!'

- 1) First what for me leaps up from the page is the *absolute conviction* of the early disciples that *Jesus had indeed risen from the dead.* (This includes Thomas who was initially sceptical) According to John's gospel account Mary Magdalene, and the 11 experienced Jesus' presence. This conviction stayed with these and other disciples given this experience. It was nevertheless a mixed response – with fear – so much so they were consoled by an angel – 'Do not be afraid. ' Then following the encounter with the angel 'they left the tomb quickly, with fear and great joy....'

Later on that day the two disciples on the road to Emmaus had a similar experience of surprise, a stranger had joined them on the walk and Luke related first 'their eyes were kept from recognising him, then at the meal 'their eyes were opened and they recognised Jesus.'

Later John in his letter wrote 'we declare to you... what we have heard, what we have looked at, we have seen with our eyes and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life...' Peter testified in his sermon in Caesarea, '...God raised Jesus on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.' (Acts 10.42). Then there was Paul who listed a number of appearances in writing to the Corinthians, and his own experience on the Damascus Road ...'last of all as one untimely born, he appeared also to me.' Luke also summarises, 'with great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus and great grace was upon them all. (Acts 4.33). John's own reflection sums up these and other experiences for the readers of his gospel as '*signs* so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name.'

- 2) The truth and experience of Jesus rising from the dead is 'bottom line' for our belief as Christians. We can trust in the promise of Jesus at his final appearance, '*I am with you always.*' That's the assurance of his on-going presence, and also 'where two or more are gathered in my name there am I in the midst.' Thus we are given to experience Jesus in worship, and especially in celebration of the Eucharist as we 'do this in memory of Jesus.' There are other ways also, in our quiet time, in devotions, in 'meetings' with other believers and in acts of mercy: '... insomuch as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters you did it to me.' And 'whoever welcomes one such in my name, welcomes me.'
- 3) A key learning from these assurances is that they aid the *effectiveness of our prayers.* Our experiences of Jesus build faith as we believe in him and prayers are answered. They build faith, and I believe faith builds on faith. I find the busyness when one doesn't think about this needs to be balanced by taking the time to 'realise' Jesus' presence. For me this balancing is enabled by going to the beach and simply sitting, be-ing' and realising Jesus' presence, experiencing resurrection.

You will find your quiet place where you experience likewise. So we can identify with the words of the hymn:

'Now we rejoice to name him King,
Jesus is Lord of all the earth.
This gospel message we proclaim:
We sing his glory, tell his worth.'

St Peter has words of assurance: 'Although you have not seen him (Jesus), you love him, and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.' (1 Peter 1.8 – 9). And Jesus to Thomas: 'Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.' Thus we are called to believe: 'That Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name.'

- 4) There are further ways we can recognise Jesus' presence. They might be described as '*gifts of the risen Christ to the church*'. There is the gift of peace, the gift of Holy Spirit, and thirdly the assurance of sins forgiven.

In earlier teaching Jesus told of this special *peace* he gave – 'my peace I give you, my peace I leave with you. I do not give you as the world gives...' Jesus' peace was an inner sensing of calmness, and the disciples surely needed that following his death. Thus in his appearance to the 10 men disciples he twice blesses them with his peace. As Paul recognised it is a peace 'beyond human understanding.' Yet surely each of us has experienced this inwardly when we have encountered some adversity, some turbulence in our life. Something I believe we do is to *bring this peace* into difficult situations of others, just as Jesus taught the 70, in bringing peace where there was need. In the course of ministry I've found that many times when visiting a family in the confusion of bereavement.

A second gift is of *Holy Spirit*. John relates how Jesus breathes Holy Spirit on the disciples. What went with it was a sense of direction for the disciples now to carry on. As we are given this gift it is for the purpose of building faith and serving others.

Then a third gift, of the *assurance of sins forgiven*. This in my experience is 'release,' from something wrongly committed. This can also be a block to one's own spiritual growth and relationship with Jesus. Thus it was important for Jesus to several times teach on the nature of forgiveness. He showed it also in his releasing Peter after the three-time denial before Jesus died on the cross. For Peter to be able to 'move on' Jesus asked him three times, 'Do you love me?' Then in moving on – he was given a pastoral task, 'feed my sheep.'

I well remember a service when in Dunedin our parish joined with the Māori church of the Otago Peninsula, and it seemed really important to acknowledge hurts of the past and seek forgiveness. The sense of release of both congregations was tangible especially as we shared the Peace.

We may have a memory of something unsatisfactory in our past and not dealt with where forgiveness is required. Belief in Jesus to forgive and seeking ministry is a way through. Remember also the words of assurance of the service: 'God forgives you, forgive others forgive yourself.' This surely is 'release' - a key gift of Jesus to the church, to its members.

- 5) *Finally* as the early church pondered the death and resurrection of Jesus it was to recognise Jesus as Christ, the anointed one. Thankfully, the church in recent years has come to appreciate afresh this truth, in recognising *Christ in all creation*. This extends to the *whole* of creation – the universe, galaxies, stars, planets, and the uniqueness so far as we know of planet earth. Hence we read in Colossians 1: 'Christ is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible.' Thus humans under God have special responsibility for *care of creation*. Evidence is mounting that climate is changing – arising especially from the burning of fossil fuels, warming the atmosphere and causing more intense storms, and consequent damage. So back to the hymn – 'Now we rejoice to name him King – Jesus is Lord of all the earth, he is the king of creation.'

Thus we can celebrate resurrection and rejoice Christ is risen, saying 'Alleluia! Glorious Lord of life, we praise you!'