



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 20th April 2025

Readings: *Isaiah 65,17-25; Luke 24.1-12*

Easter Day

Sharing Together

The All Ages element of the service was an exploration of words that can be made by changing one letter of the word Easter. Those suggested by the congregation included the following, which were then used as ways of understanding the life of those influenced by the Easter message.

Waster: 'a dissolute person' - 'an imperfect/inferior manufactured article/object' ¹

That's what some thought of Jesus – they wanted rid of such a waster. But Easter's message is that you can't finish off God.

Master: Instead, Jesus as he shows us God is the Master we follow and obey

Easier: Walking with Jesus makes life a whole lot easier – not because there are no challenges - there are many - but because the Easter Jesus has got the better of everything that makes life harder – lies, hate, temptation, etc – which makes life easier.

Eaters: Jesus comes to us every time we eat the bread and drink the wine of Communion

Taster: Jesus is the one who gives us a taste of the best life can be – joy in the good times, peace for tough times, wisdom for the confusing times, life for all times.

Introduction to the reading from the Hebrew Scriptures: *Isaiah 65.17-25*

All those years ago, Isaiah knew the world's ills as well as you and I do. His illustrations include the high infant mortality rate.² In his day the life expectancy was thirty-five. That was not so much because no adults lived into the fifties or sixties, but because so few children lived beyond infancy – just one in four - that it seriously dragged down the mean average age.

So it is that the prophet's dream is for a world where living to a hundred is more the norm. Concerned for the world's legion poor people, Isaiah also dreams of a world where poverty is history.

And the point of this next reading is that just as God never gives up on doing a creative new thing – the resurrection is illustration enough of that – so the basic role for people of religious faith is to collaborate with God: to let the temple – the church – be a community in which God's life-giving influence is so great that it changes the world in which those believers are set. Unlike some other prophecies that rightly critique faith communities, these later chapters of Isaiah *affirm* the faith community whenever it becomes the instrument of God's new thing doing. That is what it is to be

Easter people rather than **Waster** people.

So, we hear from Isaiah's great vision of 'the glorious new creation'. After the reading, the Choir sing of God's people going into their sacred spaces to sing God's praise, and to serve God's purposes, joyfully, gladly. It will be the *Jubilate in B flat* by Sir Charles Villiers Stanford.

Sermon

Let us pray
Holy Spirit, by your lively work,
may these spoken words,
informed by the written word,
be a life-giving word,
about the living Word, Jesus Christ. Amen

With the masterful understatement of a certain sort of Briton, King Charles' Easter message observes 'One of the puzzles of our humanity is how we are capable of both great cruelty and great kindness.'³ In a

¹ Available at <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/waster>; accessed 17th April 2025

² Isaiah 65.20

³ King Charles III's Easter Message 17th April 2025

similar vein of understatement, a World Council of Churches document once said, 'Sin, too, is a problem.'

And perhaps the understatement enhances the eloquence. Surely you and I know what they mean. This world, at once both glorious and grievous, leaves us profoundly 'puzzled'. I hardly need to mention examples, some are on a global scale, while others are affecting our neighbours in this seriously unequal city, or perhaps it's our families whose circumstances puzzle us, at once a delight and yet so many times passing through difficult days.

'Twas ever thus. Isaiah's lamentation two and half thousand years ago about infant mortality helps us know that no generation has been exempt from that which alerts us to human frailty, and to earthly life's impermanence, even if we do reach a hundred. That's why Easter messages matter so much. What do the empty cross and tomb say to us when our homes and our world, our heads and our hearts are so puzzling as to empty us of hope?

Well, of course, in part the empty cross and tomb leave us befuddled. What is this narrative all about? So much so that the questioning all too readily gets in the way of the hoping and of the believing.

But maybe like me you are struck by the way St Luke tells the resurrection story. The women who first heard from those in the Garden that Jesus 'is not here, but has risen' tried to tell the apostles, but were dismissed as peddlers of 'idle tales'. Peter, on the other hand, having got himself to the tomb, hearing what then women told him, and finding it just as they'd said, was 'amazed'.

And in a sense the other Gospel writers, each in their own way, do something like Luke. None of them try to tell us how the resurrection happened. Less still do they attempt scientific or medical explanations. Rather they want to make a theological point, that the one who was dead enough to be in tomb, wasn't any longer. His word and his way still hold sway. We can even afford to think that the narrative itself might be an idle tale – foolish, or lacking credibility - but still find an intimation of theological insight in it. So, the arguably ludicrous account of an abandoned tomb could nonetheless be a vehicle for God to convey something about how divine ways are radically different from down to earth ones, how that which defeats us need not do so if God is given the upper hand.

Luke's other word for reactions to the empty tomb in real time told of Peter's 'amazement'. It's a word that is about marvelling; marvelling which will think, explore, read, discuss the empty tomb. And as so often, such active amazement (for surely, we mustn't allow amazement to remain passive) can be truly worthwhile as people help one another discover some nuggets of insight that wouldn't have occurred to them without the engagement with others in conversation. A case in point is the recent discussions in Fulbourn and Cherry Hinton about the words of Jesus from the cross. Every week of that six-week programme I have learned something from what others have asked or said. Surely, by that token, the amazing empty tomb if we actively allow it to amaze us that we take it really seriously need not leave us empty of hope.

But not everyone is content with deriving lessons from something that is described as an idle tale, or as 'amazing', because how many times do you hat then word amazing about things which really aren't at all? They need to be confident in what the Bible says. Despite his sometimes-unorthodox Christianity, John Updike challenged us to take the resurrection account more literally.

Make no mistake [he wrote]: if He rose at all
it was as His body;
if the cells' dissolution did not reverse, the molecules
reknit, the amino acids rekindle,
the Church will fall. ...
Let us not mock God with metaphor,
analogy, sidestepping, transcendence;
making of the event a parable, a sign painted in the
faded credulity of earlier ages:
let us walk through the door. ...

Let us not seek to make it less monstrous,
for our own convenience, our own sense of beauty,
lest, awakened in one unthinkable hour, we are
embarrassed by the miracle,
and crushed by remonstrance.⁴

Idle tale, amazing, or a trustworthy door to walk through? Over the years, preaching on Easter Day has taught me that my task is not so much to suggest *how* Jesus was raised, but to offer ways in which we can be enabled to give this episode enough credibility that it can bear the weight of our need of a word of hope for the world in which ‘we are capable of both cruelty and kindness’. The exact details of what actually happened seem to me to be of secondary importance to whether it communicates that God is present and undefeated in the world God made - present, undefeated, and active, so that the ills of the world do not go unchallenged, so that my sins do not sentence me to oblivion before I have heard a word of grace that God so loved the world that God sent a Son not to condemn the world but to save it,⁵ so that I can live this life and await the next one in faith, hope and love.

Ultimately, I am much less concerned to understand how a body can break the cast iron grip of death than I am to let the living God break you and me, and the whole Church out of the tomb of complacency and secularism that is leaving whole generations unaware of the saving redeeming love of God for this life and for the next; much less worried about how a carpenter Rabbi is released from the grave than I am about how the ills of the world can be reversed, not by dogmatic political will of whatever hue, but by the work of the Holy Spirit arresting the Church and using us for such Easter living that the **waster** is reformed, for an **easier** life, walking the way of the **Master**, as a **taster** of the best life we can have when, as **eaters** of the bread and wine we know the seal of God’s saving grace in our lives.

Five years ago, in the first Easter of the pandemic, when we were all locked down, a cartoon appeared, with a policeman shouting to Jesus as he stands at the tomb’s threshold about to walk out. The Officer, masked, yells out to Jesus, ‘don’t even think about it.’

Jesus didn’t just think about it; he did it. He emerged to live the Easter life, that we might do so, too, for the kingdom to be fulfilled, and for all people to know that love which restores them and uses them to restore this puzzling world.

May it be so, and to God, through the risen Lord Jesus Christ, to that God alone be the glory. Amen

N. P. Uden

20th April 2025

⁴ Updike, John *Seven Stanzas for Easter*

⁵ John 3.16f