



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 17th April 2022

Readings: Psalm 118; Acts 10.34-43; I Corinthians 15.19-26; Luke 24.1-12

EASTER DAY 2022

What's been on your mind in the past week? I've been thinking of an elderly person giving their relatives Power of Attorney; of the imminent Baptism of my Godson's daughter; of a blocked drain in the Manse kitchen; of people unwell in hospital, but whom Covid prevents anyone visiting; of being the descendent of Huguenot refugees; of Kwa Zulu Natal, where floods devastated homes and families; of Jesus nailed to the cross, but no longer needing a tomb. And as I was writing this sermon in my office, the chatter in the background was of people from Ukraine who have arrived in Cambridge, and were meeting for mutual support in the Hub: a suckling infant and an aged priest amongst them. And then a Russian person arrived, asking if they could help.

In very different ways, each of those created the context in which I was wondering what an Easter sermon might look like this year. After all, the Easter message is best told in real time, with the author's up to the minute experience shaping how they interpret it.

Bearing that in mind, I am helped by the idea that the four Gospels are stories of what Pádraig Ó Tuama calls 'the incarnated life that was not held by death'.¹ So, we might recognise that each Gospel writer tells the story of 'the incarnated life that was not held by death' against the backdrop of their own context. For example, St Luke that we heard read, is writing as a citizen of the Roman Empire, which is nevertheless infused with the Hellenistic culture that had spread so widely because of Alexander's conquest four centuries before Christ. To this heady Latin and Greek cultural cocktail, Luke adds the good news of Jesus. It seems he wants to present the story of 'the incarnated life that was not held by death' as something to improve the society of his day; it's what James Edwards terms, 'a redemptive force within culture'.² In a similar way, St Paul writes about the resurrection in I Corinthians 15 because his audience is faced by a range of doctrinal and ethical issues. He's addressing their lived experience and trying to offer tools for new life in Christian life.

You see, this Easter message is so much more than a fusty philosophical proposition, merely for teasing academic theologians. Just as Luke and Paul use it to address the issues of their day, so we need to let it find flesh in *our* story today.

Even as I say that, I could believe that some of you would prefer me to engage in speculation about what resurrection really is, and how a dead body could possibly be raised to life. If I were persuaded that would help, I would try; honestly. Suffice it to say that scripture and history all attest that something happened on the third day to give people confidence that Jesus' power and place and influence continued after his death on the cross. And that's what matters.

People's burial places often fascinate succeeding generations. I think of the Ascension Parish Burial Ground off Huntingdon Road, where it's possible to see the resting places of many Cambridge notables, such as [Margaret Heitland](#), journalist and suffragette,³ Professor Alexander Macalister, an anatomist,⁴ and his cousin, Sir Donald Macalister, a physician, and Chancellor of the University of Glasgow, both elders of this church,⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, the philosopher,⁶ Charles Wood, the composer, and⁷ Agnes Collier, a pioneer female mathematician, and Vice Principal of Newnham

¹ Ó Tuama, Pádraig 2015 *In the Shelter: finding a home in the world* London: Hodder page 232

² Edwards, James R. 2015 *The Gospel according to Luke* Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans page 14

³ 1860-1938

⁴ 1844-1919

⁵ 1854-1934

⁶ 1889-1951

⁷ 1866-1926

College.⁸ Likewise, on the Isle of Iona many people make a bee line for the grave of **John Smith**, the late Member of Parliament.⁹

But have you ever noticed how, for 2000 years, people have not gone to see where Jesus' mortal remains lie? Yes, they go to a place that is suggested as possibly where the Joseph of Arimathea's Garden Tomb was. But they don't go to see where he was buried. They go to see where he was raised; and that's different.

Insomuch as my opinion matters, I am content to take these as signs that 'the incarnated life was not held by death'. But even more so, I need only look around me to see those signs, for in every life that is changed by its engagement with the Gospel we unearth the truth of the resurrection. It's not a proposition but a way of life. It 'sends us out to live our 'life in earth in a wholly new way'.¹⁰ Every way in which we make real God's dying but undying love is a witness to the resurrection; that the incarnated life could not be constrained, trapped or stopped.

One of the other Easter ideas that gains immense traction is that just as it is about Jesus being alive after he was dead, so it is about *our* life after death. I rather like that idea. Recalling those I have 'loved and lost a while',¹¹ I am grateful for St Paul's crisp conviction, that, 'whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord'.¹² The final enemy is destroyed. But that idea does not encapsulate everything about why I am a Christian. I'm pretty sure that my Christianity is about *this* life; how it is redeemed by God's grace, and redefined by God's love. Let me put it this way, it doesn't make sense to me to care about life the *other* side of the grave if I don't make the most of life *this* side of the grave – the most of my own life, and of other people's, too.

And so it is that our Easter proclamation - our witness to 'the incarnated life that was not held by death' – is most authentic as we treasure *this* life. Isn't that why we care about the planet? Isn't that why we safeguard people, of any age, whatever it is that makes them vulnerable? Isn't that why we respond to other people's crises, whether they are suburban youths robbed of hope, or refugees from nations invaded by neighbours?

This life, *and* the life to come: Walter Brueggemann urges us to hold the two in tension by being 'awed to heaven and rooted in earth'.¹³ That is the Easter faith in real time. It transforms today, as a foretaste of tomorrow.

So it is that 'the incarnated life that was not held by death' is where I find this hope for both the coming week, and eternity, and I reckon that's worth even more than sixty alleluias.

N. P. Uden

17th April 2022

⁸ 1860-1930

⁹ 1938-94

¹⁰ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich ed Eberhard Bethge 1953, 1967, 1971 *Letters and Papers from Prison* London: SCM page 336

¹¹ Newman, John Henry 1801-90 from the Hymn, *Lead kindly light* RS 544.3.6

¹² Romans 14.8

¹³ Brueggemann, Walter 2003 *Awed to heaven, rooted in earth: Prayers of Walter Brueggemann* Minneapolis: Fortress Press