



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 31st March 2024

Readings: *Psalm 118; Acts 10.34-43; Mark 16.1-8*

Easter Day

Lots of people catch up with the news online, reading website articles. It's apparently way more popular than television newscasts. And Radio 4's *Today* programme has lost nearly 25% of its listeners in the last seven years.<sup>1</sup>

For online readers, by some distance the BBC is a market leader. A quick survey of the significant news this week shows that often the item is about five hundred words in length. That's certainly true of the BBC's website's post about Hamas rejecting the UN Security Council resolution demanding an immediate ceasefire: that was 527 words. Interestingly, its item about the Scottish Parliament's imminent consideration of assisted dying went up to 1500 words, which is probably a sign to The Church that we need to be ready to speak into that debate as it gains the momentum Esther Rantzen has excited. The BBC even writes more than 250 words to report on Olly Alexander's refusal to pull out of the Eurovision Song Contest in protest against Israel's inclusion in it.

So, I wonder what it would have had to say about the resurrection. Here is the moment that redefines creation and reshapes history – 'a magnificently compelling vision', as H. A. Williams puts it.<sup>2</sup> How many words would that have inspired on the BBC News website? 500? 1500?

In what is admittedly the shortest of the Gospels, St Mark gives it fewer than two hundred. But what words they are! We might note that they tell a story, rich in description. They do not define what resurrection is, but evocatively narrate a few people's experience of resurrection. Maybe the first evangelist felt as H. A. Williams did, when he wrote, 'resurrection ceases to be resurrection and becomes no more than another example of human banality, a futile extravaganza, once it is pinned down in a definition.'<sup>3</sup>

Well, not unlike St Peter's 208-word sermon (and I appreciate that is an object lesson which I do not show much evidence of learning), Mark's 195 words are rather thrilling. In verse one there's **compassion** – the women want to anoint him for a more proper burial than the Sabbath rush has allowed the evening before. In verse two, there is **involvement** – the two Marys and Salome take themselves to Joseph of Arimathea's garden, equipped with the customary spices. In verse three, they are **concerned**: 'who will roll away the stone for us?' In verse four, they are **surprised** to find the stone already rolled back. In verse five, they **encounter** a young man, and become **alarmed** at what has happened. In verse six, they get some **intriguing** information: 'He has been raised.' In verse seven, they are **commissioned** to go and tell his disciples. And in verse eight, the full force of what has occurred strikes them: a strange mixture of amazement and **terror** had seized them'. It's not investigative journalism that tries to explain it; less still to explain it away. It's a narrative that takes us into the experience and continues onwards into a new chapter. Indeed, no fewer than six of those verses start with St Mark's trademark kai – 'and', suggesting there is a dynamic movement to this resurrection scene. And this, and that, and then, and next ... There is no end to this resurrection narrative, to this resurrection experience.

Whatever it is, resurrection reassures its witnesses that the Jesus they trusted but on Friday had begun to fear was a fraud, is actually their Lord. Resurrection demonstrates to its witnesses that the life of God who was so violently threatened on the cross has proved to be victorious. Resurrection points to God's complete devotion to humanity: in Jesus, God becomes one of us, and in Joseph's garden, God

<sup>1</sup> <https://inews.co.uk/news/media/radio-4-today-programme-battle-insiders-listeners-2348733#:~:text=The%20Radio%204%20Today%20programme,the%20latest%20Rajars%20figures%20show.> Accessed 30<sup>th</sup> March 2024

<sup>2</sup> Williams, H. A. 1972 *True Resurrection* London: Mitchell Beazley page 3

<sup>3</sup> *ibid* page 181

seals the covenant with us that not even our dying or his can break. <sup>4</sup> And resurrection reveals that the Love out of which all things are made, the Love by which all things are sustained and given their purpose, is a Love that will not be defeated; confronted and challenged, of course - all the time - but unconquerable. This Love is the gift of God that keeps on giving.

St Mark's disinclination to explain the 'how and why' of resurrection is perhaps because those details are 'ultimately indescribable'. But defying definition need not imply irrelevance. Indeed, H. A. Williams, famous for his suggestion that resurrection is a metaphor, doesn't understate its significance, even with that radical understanding. After the assertion that resurrection is ultimately indescribable, he goes on to suggest how 'that is not only because it infinitely transcends us, but also because [resurrection] encompasses us, informing everything we are as the water informs and fills the sea', he says. <sup>5</sup>

So, indescribable as it is, resurrection nevertheless defines us. It is an intimation of how all that we have and are and do is immersed in the presence and power of the living God.

And I find myself pondering how their experience of this risen Christ affected the first disciples, as they lived with religious dispute – clearly, they did not see eye to eye with the High Priest; as they lived with political oppression – clearly, they were no friends of the Romans; and pondering how it affected them as they lived with the personal vicissitudes from which, clearly, not one of us will forever be exempt.

Here was an idea, so richly described by Mark as to be life-changing experience, that surely it would enable them to re-imagine their religion, their society, and their own lives, until paradoxically they were both saner and more hopeful because the resurrection of Christ encompassed them.

Mark records the young man at the empty tomb telling them that the risen Christ has gone ahead of them to Galilee. Galilee is their home. It's where they will be returning to live after three years accompanying the wandering Nazarene. The one whom death could not defeat will be there with them, 'encompassing them, informing all that they will go on to do.' So it is that the various gospels tell of how his appearance beside the lake in Galilee transformed their fishing, <sup>6</sup> then beckoned them into new priorities for caring and nurturing, <sup>7</sup> and sent them to 'make disciples of all nations'. <sup>8</sup>

And *our* Galilees? How will the resurrection define life where *we* live and work? How will the encompassing truth that 'love's redeeming work [might indeed be] done' <sup>9</sup> but still needs sustaining in the here and now, how will that shape our lives –

- our approach to artificial intelligence – that's such a stark disconnection, isn't it, resurrection and AI, but actually it isn't – that's the whole point; resurrection is about the here and now, it *does* need to affect how we understand and implement and control and enjoy artificial intelligence;
- how will resurrection affect our solidarity with marginalised people;
- our response to others' suffering;
- how will living out the resurrection shape our exercise of power, which when exercised as service is life-giving, but when abusive or exploitative is death-dealing;
- how will resurrection, this undefeated and indefatigable love of God in Christ, shape our showing 'love to the loveless ... that they might lovely be'; <sup>10</sup>
- how will it help us respond to our recognition of our own flaws, and failings, and follies;
- how will it influence our consideration that 'we are dust and to dust we shall return'? <sup>11</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> cf Williams, Rowan 2017 *The Sign and the Sacrifice* Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press page 85

<sup>5</sup> *ibid* page 182

<sup>6</sup> John 21.4ff

<sup>7</sup> John 21.15ff

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 28.29

<sup>9</sup> Wesley, Charles 1707-88, from the Hymn, *Christ the Lord is risen today* RS 232.2.1

<sup>10</sup> Crossman, Samuel 1624-84, from the hymn, *My song is love unknown* RS 207.1.3f

<sup>11</sup> Genesis 3.19

Well, you see, resurrection isn't what you and I do. It is God's work in us. It is the new life in Christ that Baptism signifies and seals that we are enabled to live the resurrection. As we soon shall sing:

We share by water in his saving death.  
Reborn, we share with him in Easter life  
as living members of a living Christ.<sup>12</sup>

Indescribable though it is, when all else is said and done, resurrection is best understood in the imperfect tense. It is not the past tense, something that happened and is completed. This is a past action that keeps on giving. And for the same reason, so is our baptism in the imperfect tense.

That's why we heed the risen One's call to come to the Baptistery and to the Font and to the Table, which, like 'the thing with feathers'<sup>13</sup> ask nothing but offer everything, only then irresistibly to hear the call to live out that baptism in faithful following and service in Easter lives.

Let that be the Easter narrative of our lives as resurrection encompasses us for this life, and for what is on 'the far side of the boundary drawn by death', as well.<sup>14</sup> And may it so characterise us, that it even reaches the BBC website because it's startlingly authentic, because it's truly transformative, and because it is transparent with the dying and undying love of God in Christ.

That's resurrection. The Lord is risen, The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia.

N. P. Uden

31<sup>st</sup> March 2024

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<sup>12</sup> Geyer, John Brownlow, 1932-2020, from the hymn, *We know that Christ is raised* CH4 635.2

<sup>13</sup> Dickinson, Emily 1861 from the poem, *'Hope is the thing with feathers'*.

<sup>14</sup> Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, in a 1944 letter to Eberhard Bethge. See *Letters and Papers from Prison*, edited by Eberhard Bethge translated by Reginald Fuller et al 1953 London: SCM Press page 336