

It's not the end – just the beginning!

Easter Day

16th April 2017

Matthew 28:1-10



Is the world moving closer to war? The Korean Peninsula is a ticking time bomb. China is mobilizing troops on the border with North Korea. President Donald Trump is calling this autocratic state to account by sending a naval strike force into the area.

And this comes in the light of the US military dropping the “mother of all bombs”, capable of wiping an area this size of Carlingford, on a terrorist site in Afghanistan last week. Meanwhile North Korean leader, Kim Jong-un, is threatening the US with an “annihilating strike” with “catastrophic consequences” as his arsenal of weapons are poised to strike Seoul, the capital of South Korea just 60 kilometers away and his capacity to launch a nuclear attack in the region terrifies everyone.

I have visited North Korea on three occasions. It's a spooky, troubling place, quite unreal in so many ways, with its merciless restrictions on the freedom of movement and its pitiless, brutal treatment of anyone who dissents. North Korea is a totalitarian state ruled by leaders who kill anyone who gets in their way. Millions have died in this very dark country from famine, torture and incarceration in prison camps.

Then last week on Palm Sunday two Coptic Christian churches were targeted in Egypt. The Copts are an ancient faith going right back to the time of the Apostles. They are being targeted and the terrorists have one goal in mind – to rid Egypt and the rest on Middle East of all Christians.

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And it's happening. Numbers of Christians have declined substantially with only three per cent of the population of the Middle East being Christian today.

With these issues in mind, how can we really celebrate Easter? How can we say death is defeated when so many die? How can we declare evil has been conquered when Satan seems to have the upper hand?

Our reading this morning from Matthew's Gospel provides an account of the resurrection of Jesus. It talks up this amazing event as the women discover the empty tomb and then meet the risen Christ face-to-face. Here there is an earthquake followed by the appearance of dazzling white angel. It's a powerful, riveting story that cannot be ignored!

But let's not get too waylaid by or too over-excited by the dramatic, stirring nature of this account. What's important is to listen to what is actually being said.

There are two things here that I wish to draw your attention to on this Easter morning.

Firstly, the angel announces to the women that the One who is raised is *"Jesus who was crucified"* (Matthew 28:5).

Now this is important. For what the angel is really saying is this. The risen Christ is, and will always remain, the crucified Christ.

On such a joyous, groundbreaking day this may seem a bit of a contradiction. But Jesus, in his appearance on Easter morning, still bares the wounds of his crucifixion. John's Gospel also talks about this – and we will hear more next week.

In the original text of the Gospel (that was written in Greek) the perfect tense is used here as the angel refers to Jesus *"who was crucified"*. Sadly, the English translation does not pick this up as the original text actually refers to the action of crucifixion, which took place in the "past", as continuing to describe what is happening "now".

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In other words, the risen Christ continues to bear the marks of crucifixion. And this means Jesus is, and always will be, the One who is crucified. Moreover, it means crucifixion is an ongoing state. And here we are called to receive the risen Christ as the One who constantly bears the marks of his passion.

Friends, on this Easter Day our risen Lord is, and always will be, the One who humbles himself to endure the world's grief. Our risen Lord is, and always will be, the One who offers himself to carry the burden of humanity's fears. Our risen Lord is, and always will be, the One who confronts the terrors of this planet.

In simple terms, crucifixion and resurrection go hand in hand. The Jesus who suffers for the sake of the world and the Christ who is gloriously raised to life from death - is the one and the same Lord!

As the Korean Peninsula faces the prospect of war, as Christians in the Middle East experience genocide and as our fears grow in response to these and other terrible events, Jesus is present with all those who are threatened. Jesus is with all those who suffer or who fear for what is to become.

For you see, resurrection is not some escape clause from the realities of what we face today. Easter Day is not a "quick fix" that insulates us from the realities of suffering, fear or terror. Rather, resurrection takes place in the context of crucifixion.

The One who overcomes death and the One who triumphs over evil is the One who dies and who is subject to very worst that humankind can do.

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Secondly, the disciples are instructed not to remain in Jerusalem but to go to Galilee where their risen Lord awaits them.

Now, why go to Galilee? It's a long three day walk to the north, quite a long way from Jerusalem. Moreover, with everything that had gone on in the city over the past few days, the risen Christ surely could have made some ground in this crowded city at the height of the Passover!

But no. Matthew says Jesus goes on to Galilee. And Jesus does so because Galilee is where his ministry began. Galilee is where it all happened. Galilee is where Jesus healed the sick, fed the hungry and reached out to the down and out. Galilee is where Jesus preached the greatest sermon of all. It's where Jesus taught his followers to love their enemies. Galilee is where Jesus introduced people to the Golden Rule as his followers were challenged to love others as God loves them.

So, you see, the instruction to go on to Galilee is all about the importance of Jesus' ministry as it took place in that region. And today the disciples are sent back to continue this ministry. They are sent back to Galilee to continue that loving, healing, liberating work first begun by Jesus.

The resurrection of Jesus is, my friends, not the end of the story. It's actually just the beginning!

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Note that in Matthew's Gospel, once the disciples arrive in Galilee, they are called upon by Jesus to continue and extend his ministry. The closing section of Matthew chapter 28 speaks about Jesus commissioning his followers to:

"make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you," (Matthew 28:19-20).

Here, in Galilee, the risen Christ commissions his followers to go, not just to ministry in Galilee, but to ministry beyond, even to the four corners of the world and to all people in his name.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, Easter Day is not some kind of magic pill that transforms the world into a good place. To simply exclaim "he is risen" doesn't fix things. For, the truth of the matter is that we live in a chaotic world.

The Kim Jong-un's and the Bashar Assad's of this world continue to exercise power and threaten us.

Weapons of mass destruction haunt us while the terrorists continue to strike in Paris, Berlin, London, Stockholm, St Petersburg, Dortmund, Homs, Mosul, Tanta and Alexandria.

On a personal level, we continue to live with the things that cause us concern. It may be sickness or anxiety. It may be a sense of inadequacy or guilt. It may be a sense of loss, a deep-seated disappointment or a bitter feeling of regret. It may be deep feeling of anger or an ongoing awareness that the world either doesn't care or really doesn't want to know.

Whatever it is, Easter Day doesn't simply erase such things.

Rather, on Easter Day we discover that the One who is raised to life by God to sit in glory at God's right hand is the One who is crucified every day in the suffering of his people. The One who defeats the satanic forces of this world once and for all is the One who targeted, brutalized and killed by those very forces as they hound and stalk us every day.

So, what can we really say on this Easter Day?

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Friends, the clue here is that Easter Day is not the end of the story – rather, it’s actually the beginning!

For you see, on Easter Day, we are gifted with the truth that, in the midst of the chaos, in the middle of all the bad stuff - there is hope. Right there in the tough issues we endure and in the horrible things that drag us down, there is hope because God is present. God is there in the crucified One.

And secondly, there is hope because it is the crucified One, the One who experiences all the bad stuff, who is raised to life with the call to each one of us to continue his ministry of love, mercy, compassion and forgiveness.

Easter Day is not the end of the story – it’s just the beginning!

Friends, here Easter Day offers us vision of what the world can be - if we acknowledge the crucified One in our midst and if we heed his call to continue his works of healing, reconciliation, justice and peace.

So, you see, Easter is the beginning of the journey – it’s not the end. Let us all journey forward together in faith and in obedience - to serve our crucified, risen Lord – wherever he takes us and whatever it involves!

Amen.



John Barr