

## **Easter 2011 – ‘God isn’t done yet’**

**Reading: Matthew 28: 1-10**

I wonder if, like me, you’ve occasionally tried to imagine how you might have reacted if you had been one of Jesus’ disciples? I know as I hear and read the stories we find in the gospels I often think I might have been a bit of a Thomas - the ultimate optimistic pessimist, who doubts almost everything, but goes with it regardless – or maybe a Peter – the faithful but sometimes slightly thick right hand man – or perhaps James or John – looking out for opportunities to advance in the disciple ranks – I’m really not sure which one I would be most like. What I am sure of, what I know because I’ve been there myself, as most of us have at some time in our lives, is that when it all turned to custard, at the darkest hour of the longest night, as Jesus was being led away to be tortured and die, as his disciples, his friends, abandoned him, I would have almost certainly been one of them. When all hope was gone, I would have been ready to give up.

Two weeks ago I warned those who were here that I was preaching the first of a three part sermon, and then I talked about death. As we explored Ezekiel’s Valley of Dry Bones I spoke about the siege of Jerusalem, six centuries before Jesus, and the disease and famine and violence that killed thousands before finally the Babylonians won. And then for those who survived the horror of being forced from their land; losing not just their homes and families, but in their minds even their God. It was a time of complete and utter despair for Israel, and so a fortnight ago we thought about what it was like to face devastation and disaster beyond imagination, and to experience the complete obliteration of any hope within you. It was cheerful stuff.

Then last week, for part two, I read the Passion from Matthew’s Gospel. We heard John’s version on Friday, and in both cases what we find of course is the familiar story of Jesus being led away to be crucified, but within that story there is a journey – a journey from the optimistic exuberance of Palm Sunday, to the uncertainty of the last supper, to the shock of betrayal in the garden, to guilt and despair in the High Priest’s courtyard, to anger and hatred and torture and bloodshed and finally, again, death in the most awful and despicable way humanity can imagine. Again, cheerful stuff.

And now today; and appropriately perhaps we start with an earthquake. Matthew’s is the only gospel to describe the first Easter in this way, and it does seem appropriate, not just because we’ve heard far too much about earthquakes lately, but also because, as we’ve sadly learned, earthquakes change everything. They don’t just destroy buildings and take lives, they shift the very ground we stand on and move it and reshape it in such a way that it can never be the same again – nothing, from that time on, is as it was before.

I imagine myself on that first Easter morning, three days after the horror of Friday, maybe just beginning to get my head around the new reality – life without Jesus, what looked like a bright and lengthy future now gone, I imagine myself in that and at best I think I would just be starting to accept it.

The same happened after the exile of course. As the years passed and the people forced out of Israel settled in their new place what began as exile became emigration and slowly they built houses and made homes and while they might have often longed for what was they began to adapt to what is, and then ... another earthquake came.

What the exiles discovered more than 500 years before Christ, and what the disciples found on that first Easter morning, was that despite what they had been through, despite the despair and the devastation and the complete obliteration of hope, despite it all, God wasn't done yet.

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And here we are – Havelock North, 2011, and most of us haven't been forced from our homes or our countries. Though God knows this land has been there, we ourselves, or most of us anyway, haven't lived through an earthquake that has shifted our ground and reshaped our lives, or not a geological one anyway.

Most of us I suspect have had our own ground-shifting moments, days, maybe even years. Most of us have experienced at some time what it's like to be exiled, dislocated, not where we think we ought to be. Most of us, at times, have felt like there is no more hope, that life as we knew it is gone.

And the message of Easter, the message of that first Easter and this Easter and every other Easter between then and now remains just this; God isn't done yet.

On this day, against all the odds, despite all improbabilities and impossibilities, on this day the earth moves again, the ground shifts and changes, and on this day, to borrow a term much overused in church circles right now, Love Wins.

Matthew's earthquake is indeed an appropriate image for Easter. As we celebrate the new life of resurrection, as we sing our alleluias and share our signs of peace and say together the most ancient of Christian creeds, 'Christ is Risen', we need to remember also that all new births, all resurrections, all experiences of new life are also signs of change. From right now, they remind us, nothing will ever be the same. There is hope in that, but also anxiety. Again I think Matthew gets it just right when we hear that the two Mary's, following their encounter with the angel, "left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy".

May we embrace both the joy and the fear of new life. May we go out in faith to spread the Easter word. And in our darkest days, when hope is scarce and light is gone, then may we know that unlikely as it seems, God still isn't done with us yet. Amen.