



Easter Day 2019

Today I'm speaking from the pulpit – not so much to be up high – although the preacher being seen and heard was a key aim of the architect of this church Christopher Wren. Regulars will know we normally speak from the lectern.

No – I'm here because a pulpit on a boat is the space right at the front of a boat – from which you lean out as far as you can in order to drop the anchor more deeply.

As I wonder about the mystery of the resurrection, perhaps I can offer some words while we together lean out as far as we can into the ocean of faith in order to try to help ourselves drop an anchor more deeply into the mystery of this day. And the mystery of the resurrection is especially hard to fathom as we hear the terrible news of our fellow Christians being killed as they gathered for Easter in Sri Lanka. We will pray for them as we know we are bound to them by our baptism. Because however you believe it or express it, this week is at the very heart of what it means to be a Christian; we say today in time what is eternally true; that Christ lives; that the stretching, tense, violent days of this week are followed by this new day, new life, new joy, new peace.

So – what might be a way in.

Perhaps – like those gospel stories – a very ordinary story from yesterday.

Yesterday I took my dog Joey for a walk around central London. Because of the Extinction Rebellion camps at Marble Arch and Oxford Circus, we were able to walk through Hyde Park down the middle of Oxford

Street and Regent Street home again. No traffic. Empty roads.

This church supports the movement; the PCC minuted its official support some months ago – although I don't expect everyone in this congregation to agree with the methods of the movement; the issue itself is one that all commentators have accepted on the advice of not least David Attenborough, as urgent and vital.

But it's not that specific issue that I want to offer as a reflection on resurrection; it was simply the experience of walking around the same streets, the same environment, with the same buildings as I have done hundreds of times before; but the experience being utterly different. Familiar landscape completely transformed.

The infrastructure and street furniture was all still there. Traffic lights moved from green to amber to red still; the red and green figures still told me when to cross the road even though there were no cars. On the pavement, instructions remained; Look Left, Look Right, Look Both Ways. All redundant.

The air fresher, the atmosphere quieter.

I noticed different things. With no double decker buses on the street, I had a clear view of the Barbara Hepworth sculpture on the outside of the John Lewis store on Oxford Street. I listened differently too: the loud R and B music from fashion stores was no longer competing with the noise of traffic and so seemed oddly out of place blasting its beat out into the quiet street. Even with all the

crowds shopping still down Oxford Street, I could hear one cyclist whistling.

What's the link with resurrection? Well it's to try to resist the obvious and often easier way of thinking about resurrection as a happy ending to a sad story. Resurrection is not a happily ever after ending to a sad story.

Resurrection performs a fundamental reordering of all our assumptions about what life is, what death is, what living in the world is like.

The point I'm making is that living in the light of the resurrection is like having your whole inner spiritual environment reordered: like being able to walk down the middle of Regent Street on an ordinary working day. Familiar landmarks of your life are bathed in a different light; signposts for living, old instructions and rules are no longer needed.

Living in the light of resurrection is fundamentally continuing the journey of living in such a way that I become at peace with my own death. I am invited to pray every day that I might live in the light of eternity; which invites me to live more forgiving, more loving, more dedicated to peace; to give up my competitive ways, my violent language, my desire to make sure everyone else knows how valuable I am.

Living in the light of resurrection means I see all other living things in the perspective of eternal oneness, and I start to behave accordingly.

And I see every other human being as someone from whom God cannot bear to be parted.

Living in the light of resurrection, I am asked to accept deeply and profoundly, in the manner of Peter, Judas, Thomas, and other disciples whose encounter with the risen Christ was transformative, that there are some things that will not be mended this side of eternity.

None of this makes me complacent. None of this makes me superficially happy. But it will call me to live a deeply truthful and connected life, acutely aware of all my recurring and depressingly repetitive shortcomings and damaging tendencies, but equally aware that I live in a resurrection cycle of repentance and forgiveness and starting again.

Living in the light of resurrection means I am invited in my every day life – at work at home - to listen more closely as Mary Magdalene did for the calling of my own name, to become free as she did, and not cling so closely to the old heroes or ideas I thought would save me. But instead to be freed to speak out good news to whoever might listen. And love without ceasing all those who won't.

The resurrection gospel is that women came to the garden where Jesus was buried to anoint his body. They were expecting to tend to the body of a martyr. They came looking for their dead hero so they could mourn and commemorate. And they found they were looking for salvation in the wrong place; the place of the dead. Because he was not there.

And the intimate conversation in a garden in the early morning, with an exhausted Mary Magdalene not at all clear who she is speaking to – isn't a kind of Narnia fairy story faith, only accessible out the back of some kind of Christian-only wardrobe full of Christian-only clothes.

This gospel is profound revelation about all life and all death; it is at once mysterious, disturbing, a bit frightening, not necessarily welcome. But a deep revelation of the eternal unity which is at the heart of all creation.

The risen cosmic Christ isn't just re appearing as his old self to carry on because there was more to do. The presence of the risen cosmic Christ in Creation then as now transforms the entire human story that precedes it.

Resurrection is deeply confronting. Because I am confronted with the question; can I now see the depth of my resistance to the truth of living like this? Of God? Can I see now the depth of my resistance to astonishing indestructible life? Can I see how far I took it?

Like walking through empty streets built for traffic, I see suddenly more clearly the infrastructure needed to make that traffic move.

Resurrection energy clears the streets of our inner landscape and we become painfully aware of how deeply we have convinced ourselves of the necessity of, for example, retribution; how complete our brittle spiritual scaffolding and infrastructure, which gives me temporary reassurance that I'm right and you're wrong and it's clear that injustice is, well, inevitable.

There was an art exhibition some time ago in London which had as its theme "heaven and hell". The artistic depictions of hell were vivid, moving, disturbing, anarchic, strong.

The artistic depictions of heaven were frankly pathetic: Limp-kneed shepherds in pastoral scenes, pallid angels cavorting in fields. Like no where you'd want to spend much time. It seems that actually, it's much harder for our imaginations to deal with joy and resurrection than it is the pain of crucifixion.

If you're anything like me too, I have a built in resistance to being told to be happy.

But thankfully, resurrection life; the strange disruptive energy of what there is the other side of nothing – all this has nothing whatever to do with how we're feeling or what our particular circumstances are or what our insides are doing at the time. It's not about making us feel good.

Inasmuch as it's hard to look at the cross; and we may walk round it, give it sidelong glances, bring ourselves eventually to take a look at that instrument of torture – inasmuch as it's hard to do that, it's often equally hard to look

into the tomb and find it empty. We shouldn't kid ourselves it's always easy: we get all the clues from Mary Magdalene and the other disciples; resurrection is disruptive, energising, alarming and confronts us with deep, deep questions about how we are to live in the light of it.

Before it became a message or a doctrine or a creed, Christianity was simply *contact*. A relationship: Christ with us living a life of love and forgiveness, peace and iron-willed resistance to the forces of self-centredness and death.

Resurrection is totally disruptive; it is what there is the other side of nothing. It is the life we had not thought of, and despite our best efforts can't imagine.

Because it confronts us with how we are living. Do we construct our own tomb like lives; safe, a bit gloomy, under par, not really daring to live from the joy of being alive in the world? Of course we do. We like the stone that's rolled over the entrance; it's strong, we can lean up against it, it means that not too much will be asked of us; it means that we can always say we didn't hear properly, we couldn't get up and do that, we had to stay put.

Resurrection is a disrupter in spiritual life – for an individual and for a community. As resurrection people, in this church, we're asked to live together, to build our relationships with each other as people who lean not against the stone that helps us feel safe but lean into the much less safe mystery of resurrection.

The ways that we believe in the resurrection is a bit like the variety of ways in which we can join in singing the Hallelujah Chorus as we all will at the end of this service. For some, theological doctrine is a detailed matter; like understanding every note and musical direction on the score of the Hallelujah Chorus. But not knowing how to read that music shouldn't stop anyone else from joining

in. Even if you're not sure, or think you can't sing in tune – of course you can – lean in – raise your beautiful voice - have a go – or of course if you wish, listen, and enjoy the sound and harmony of resurrection music all around you.

Like the different ways we will join in this music at the end of the service, so we circle around the melody and miracle of resurrection. A beautiful melody we're invited to sing in a fractious, violent and dissonant world.

And so I end with an interpretation of the famous saying of the 14th century mystic Julian of Norwich. Her saying is famous:

All shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well.

This is good – but it can sound simply too trite if things are simply not well with you today; if you are going through a tough time. So what I want to do is take Julian of Norwich's assurance on further in the light of resurrection life; which will always reorder our priorities from the perspective of eternity.

The joy of Easter Day tells us - Yes all shall be well in the end.

But it also tells us today that if with you it is really not well, then Ok; what that means is that it is not yet the end.