

Easter Sunday 2019

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INTRODUCTION (BEFORE THE READING)

Today we're hearing the Easter story from Matthew's gospel.
We've been working through Matthew's gospel since Christmas.
Matthew was writing initially for a Jewish community
 which is learning to welcome Gentile
 as well as Jewish followers of Jesus as Messiah;
Matthew makes clear that it's not Jewish heritage
 but how God is working in our hearts that is most significant
 for our sharing in the life of God's kingdom which is opened to us.
Matthew regularly refers to the ways that Jesus fulfils
 the words of the Hebrew prophets,
and his is the gospel which directly links Jesus' blood, shed for us,
 with the forgiveness of sins.
Jesus' death is a seismic event, as Matthew records it,
 at which the curtain in the temple is torn in two, from top to bottom,
 opening the holiest of places to the world.
Matthew gives detail and drama in his depiction of events
 that the other gospels tend to play down...

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BIBLE READING: **Matthew 27:62-66; 28:1-10**

...

I told you that Matthew's account was dramatic!

As we prepare to unpack it, let's pray:

 Gracious God,
 just as you shook the earth
 and shook the guards
 and shook the women, and the disciples
 out of their bewilderment,
 shake us too,
 that our lives
 may know the depth of your love
 and the strength of your hope.

In the name of Christ we pray.

Amen.

The women turn up at the tomb
and the main event has already happened.

Yes, there's an angel there.

Yes, the angel is strong enough to move the rock,
and shake the very earth in the process,
and shake the guards to their cores
at the same time.

But it's not to let Jesus out - he's already gone ahead of them.

The resurrection itself is not just reanimating a body.

God has taken care of it.

Jesus will show himself in due course.

The tomb is found to be empty.

While the other gospel accounts tend to deal more in the confusion
that this meant for the first witnesses,
Matthew allows less room for that.

It's dramatic, and the angel's words are direct –
essentially, the angel's words are:

“Do not be afraid. See, he is gone, ahead of you,
tell the others: he goes ahead of you to Galilee.”

And the women, who ARE afraid, as well as joyful,
run from the tomb to find the disciples,
and Jesus meets them
and they fall and embrace him
and he says to them again,
“Do not be afraid.”
“Do not be afraid.”

During this last week I've gone to a funeral for a friend of mine,
from the days when I was a tutor at Whitley College.

He died of a particular form of cancer,
sadly leaving his wife of just a few years, and a very young son.

Now, people have all sorts of experiences of death,
which are not for me to judge,

but this particular friend of mine had a depth of faith
which meant that, for him, he wasn't afraid –
he wasn't afraid of death, as much as he prayed for healing;
and while he was concerned and sorry,
he also wasn't afraid for his family,
trusting them, too, with God.

His wife – now widow's - faith too is such that
while she grieves – and deeply so – she also lives in faith.
She has heard the angels say: do not be afraid.

It's ironic, but for many people it's actually an experience of death,
or some other crisis
or loss of control
or loss of relationship
or loss of status
that leads to the real discovery of what God's kingdom is all about,
and what God's love actually means in our lives.

It feels like altogether the opposite of what I might want to preach.
Especially on resurrection Sunday, you might expect a sermon on how
“everything's alright, so, well,
everything's alright.”

Which would be a way of saying, actually, there's nothing to say here.

But one of the points being made throughout Matthew's gospel
is NOT that everything's alright.

It's not, and so there's a call on us for the sake of our own lives,
and there's a call on us for the sake of the world.

Matthew's gospel makes clear
that when the women find the tomb empty,
and when the guards find their guarding useless,
they, and their world, are shaken.

This is not how they planned their lives,
nor is it how God is expected to behave.

From the beginning of Matthew's gospel Jesus' proclamation is:
“Repent, for the kingdom of God is near.”

Repent, which means, turn around.

But it seems to me that for many of us,
in the end we need to *be turned around*
by the death of the Jesus we know.

...We need to be turned around
by the death of the Jesus we know...

For we are so prone to cling to the idea
that if we were just able to do good and be kind to those around us
then the world will be kind to us in return and that's where God is.

But Jesus WAS good,
and he died.
And we have to hear that.

And maybe for some of us
we experience that through the collapse of other 'goods'
that we cling to as substitutes for God:
the collapse of the other things that we use to shore up our identities.

When Jesus calls us to repent, to turn to God,
there is a call for us to realise that that even means letting go of the good idols
that cannot ultimately substitute for the way and the peace of God.
For there are many things that we cling to -
works and relationships and ambitions and achievements -
that ARE good,
but they are not God.

And so Jesus invites us to repent
and turn
and discover
that the kingdom of God, actually, is near.

And so, from the very beginning of Mt's gospel in Galilee,
we find Jesus inviting us to see how, in God's kingdom,
the poor in spirit are blessed;
those who mourn, are blessed;
the meek, the ones hungering for justice, the ones who give mercy,
are blessed;
the ones who put themselves out in pure heart, in peacemaking,
even in the face of persecution, are blessed.

He invites us to see blessing among brokenness
because we, ourselves, are loved by God
not because of our cleverness or goodness,
but because God loves us.

And so we are called to be salt and light in the world,
because the world needs it.

Everything's not alright.

But God loves us for who we are,
not for our achievements or our control.

And we are called not to be judgemental
and to love our enemies as well as our friends
not because we are good
but because God does.

Jesus takes his own life all the way to the cross, for enemies and friends alike,
so that every idol and every sin we cling to,
even everything that we see that is good -but is not God-
may be exposed and released,
and we may be shaken and freed to hear the angels' word of peace,
and to bring *that* peace to light in the world.

Do not be afraid, the angel says.
See, he is gone, he is ahead of you.
He goes ahead to Galilee,
which in Matthew is the place where we learn of God's love
to transform our hearts;
the place where we see that the poor in spirit are blessed;
the place where we learn to love without idolatry.
And, so transformed, you will know peace.

That is where the risen Jesus will lead you.

To add one further comment:
At the beginning of Matthew's gospel, Jesus says,
"repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near".
At the end of Matthew's gospel the call for us is
"repent and be baptised, and learn Jesus' way"
If that's a new journey for you, and you haven't been baptised for it;
or if it's a journey you've been on for a while,
I hope it's a journey we can share together.
In the name of Christ.