

Easter Day 12<sup>th</sup> April 2020: Perfume of Resurrection

Matthew 28:1-10

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Over this last few weeks I've been noticing the roller coaster of emotions within myself. I imagine it's the same for many people. I notice a mixture of uncertainty, fear, anxiety interspaced with moments of calm hope that all will be well. When I examine why I feel so unsettled, I realise it's not so much about my immediate life circumstances. I'm grateful at the moment that I have a roof over my head, food in the fridge and enough toilet paper. Rather, my anxiety is a background realisation that many things I've taken for granted are now insecure – assumptions like my superannuation being worth more next year than this year – or the assumption that I can just get in my car whenever I like and go wherever I want. As a baby boomer born in the 1960/s, all I've ever known is increasing material abundance. I've never really had to experience limitation.

So I'm really honest, the question that this self-interested ME is really wanting to know, 'when will all this end' so that I can get back to my comfortable and unconstrained life. Although things are looking grim now, I am hoping they will soon get better. The assumption I'm making here is that I want a move from bad to better. I think this would probably be a common desire for most people.

If we're not careful we might try to deploy the Easter story in the same way. What do I mean by this? Well, there is a way of thinking about Easter in terms of linear sequencing. Linear sequencing sounds a bit like this:

- Good Friday was a really BAD day (despite the enigma of calling in good). But, thank God, Easter Day came along and so all will now be well.
- Jesus has a really BAD day on Good Friday but a really GOOD day on Easter Sunday when God raised him from the dead – phew, that was a lucky break – for him at least.

If we applied this kind of thinking to COVID19 then we might say, 'God is absent now but hopefully God will show up later and make all this mess go away. We might be tempted to equate Good Friday with tens of thousands of dying people, and look for some hoped for Easter Sunday in the future when the virus either burns it's way through 10% of the world's population or we are all lining up at or a vaccine is developed. In this way of thinking Easter Day is simply a promise of good things to come on the other side of bad things.

So I guess you won't be surprised to here me say that thinking about Easter as a linear sequence of bad to good is precisely NOT the way that Christian tradition thinks about the meaning of Easter.

In a nutshell, the Christian gospel, or good news, is the Easter reveals the divine victory over death and sin – that is, a victory over all that degrades loving relationships. In Christ, God has liberated and healed the world from the effects of false and merciless master and opened a way into a reality called 'The Kingdom of God' – a state of peace – a state of reconciliation and forgiveness and mercy and compassion. This is represented, visually in an orthodox ICON which shows Jesus kicking down the doors of Sheol, the place of the dead, and raising up a man and a woman -symbolising Adam and Eve, representing humanity [Ephesians 4:9; Romans 8:38; 1 Peter 3:19].

But, we might quite legitimately say, at a time like this, 'it sure doesn't look like it! It would be very easy, even entirely understandable, to dismiss this Christian Easter Gospel as entirely deluded.

And yet, through the ages, this gospel of the victory of God and the kingdom of God persistently breaks through into the consciousness of human beings. This break through comes unexpectedly, like a thief in the night, in dreams, and visions, and small but persistent synchronicities, and moments of inspiration, and moments of kindness....and most spectacularly but elusively in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. In the gospel story, this breakthrough happens to two women at an empty tomb, and an encounter with Jesus as they run away from the empty tomb. When Jesus meets these women, he says, 'do not be afraid – go ANNOUNCE – to my brothers that they should depart into Galilee and THERE they will see me'.

In Matthew it is women who are the first witnesses to the resurrection and the ones sent to proclaim this to others – women are the first apostles. It is women who have to tell the blokes to get out of Jerusalem which has become a place of death – Jesus knows that they will only be able to perceive him when they get back to the quiet waters of the Sea of Galilee. Only there will they see the risen Christ. Right now there is too much noise, too much violence, too much grief. The doors of the kingdom of God have opened but the noise of death is too much for them to perceive it.

Last week a memory popped into my mind which might help to illustrate this point I'm trying to make about Easter. My first job after leaving home was in the merchant navy. The merchant navy is an umbrella term for all the cargo ships we see moving in and out of Fremantle. By and large, cargo ships are male dominated and noisy. After a few months of constant bloke-i-ness and the background noise of engines and airconditioning, one simply comes to live with this as the only reality – the new normal. No other world exists. So I have this memory of being in an overseas port after some months at sea. I was walking down the hall to breakfast one morning when I was overcome by something utterly unexpected – a waft of the most beautiful perfume – the announcement of a female presence. It stopped me in my tracks. Our ship had, in fact, received a visitation. The shipping agent, who happened to be a woman, had visited, down the necessary paper work with the Captain, and then departed. What she left behind was the lingering perfume – the announcement of her unmistakable and real existence – a reminder of her visit and the world from which she came.

This memory speaks to the point I'm trying to make about Easter. The resurrection is not just the promise of a 'pie in the sky with we die' – it is not a happy ending to a bad story. Rather, the Easter Story, both Good Friday and Easter Sunday as one story, is the revelation of the underlying reality of all things. John's gospel called Christ, the 'LOGOS', playing on the Greek concept of the 'structuring principle of reality'. Jesus has visited and departed – just a brief moment in the fabric of human history but his SPIRIT testifies to Christ as love as the structuring principle underlying everything. The Spirit is like an enduring perfume on a rusty old ship. The Spirit of the raised Christ permeates and surrounds the noise of death and suffering and struggle, as a gentle presence, as an announcement of the kingdom of life, steadying our hearts, even if the face of something that feels utterly overwhelming. And as people breathe the perfume of this Spirit, they become like him – reaching out to the sick, at perilous risk to their own lives which come with that. In our meditation, when we pray, 'ma-ra-na-tha' (Come Lord) we are simply listening to the Spirit already praying within us, **'Christ is risen – Alleluia'**