

Sunday 31st October – Parish Service

The Resurrection of Jesus

1 Corinthians 15:12-18

John 20:1-31

Over the past couple of months we have been working our way through the Bible, looking at the broad story of God in relationship with his people. We started way back in August with the creation of the world and in particular the creation of human beings – human beings made in God's image. We have looked at the story of his special relationship with the people of Israel through good times and bad, and in recent weeks we have been thinking about Jesus – how God himself took on human form to live amongst us to show us the way to live and bring us back to him so that we can live for him.

And one thing we may have noticed is that throughout these stories there is a constant cycle of despair and hope.

Abraham – from being childless with no future for his family line to having a son and heir and a future.

Joseph – from being abandoned by his brothers and sold into slavery to being the one who would ensure his family could survive and have a future.

Moses – from the misery of slavery in Egypt to a future in the promised land.

In the time of the prophets, the constant cycle of the people ignoring God and turning away from him – in ways that led to blind alleys of dismay and despair - and then responding to God's call to return to him for a new future following his ways.

And in Jesus' own life - him bringing healing to those in need; and value to those on the margins of society. Of bring him hope of a future to those who had none.

Throughout the Bible the theme of God always providing hope and a future. Of God saying we should not be defined by our pasts, but by his plan for our futures. Of God saying "it doesn't have to be like this" and giving us the opportunity to change.

And today we are thinking about the biggest transformation from despair to hope in the whole Bible. The resurrection of Jesus.

Last week we thought about Jesus' death on the cross. Rich explained the significance of Jesus death, of how like the sacrifices in the Old Testament Jesus' act of self offering brought about forgiveness for us. Today we see how the resurrection completed the transformation. Jesus's death dealt with the past, his resurrection offers a future. The cross

talks about what we are saved from; the resurrection looks forward to what we are saved for.

So let's for a moment go back to the story of Jesus' death. Imagine those people who had followed him, who had seen in him hope for the world, who had listened to his teaching and been inspired, who had committed themselves to him because in him they saw hope.

Imagine their thoughts as they saw him arrested, tried and crucified.

Imagine for example Mary Magdalene. Someone whose life had been turned around by Jesus. The demons of the past that haunted her and defined her life were dealt with by Jesus and she was shown the possibility of new life, of a new hope before her.

She was one of those who was there at the foot of the cross as Jesus was crucified; who saw all her hopes and dreams being nailed to a cross; who saw her future being taken away and her hope evaporating.

Today's gospel reading starts with Mary – in her despair and hopelessness – going to the tomb to do the last thing she could do for Jesus. The last thing she could do for the one who had given her hope for a new future that had now been dashed. But when she got to the tomb the stone had been removed and the body gone. Her despair deepened. Even the small thing she had felt she could do – anoint his body – was now taken away from her. What hope now?

And it's into that despair, into that hopelessness that hope comes.

The story of her going to the tomb is so familiar to us that perhaps we find it hard, if not impossible, to appreciate the depth of the emotions here. We might wonder at why Mary seemed to take so long to put things together and recognise that Jesus was alive. But we come to the story with the benefit of hindsight. We know the ending, and it's so much easier to interpret the clues when we know the answer.

But the truth did slowly become clear to Mary, and the passage ends with her bold declaration of faith "I have seen the Lord!" Her despair turned to hope. There was a future; there was a reason to proclaim this truth that Jesus had risen.

And we can see a similar transformation in the other followers of Jesus. From keeping themselves hidden in a locked room, they were emboldened to proclaim this great truth of the resurrection; emboldened to preach the gospel of hope. Empowered by the Holy Spirit – the very presence of the power of God within them – they were able to begin a movement which has changed the world. To spread the good news of hope by word and deed.

So, we might ask, what is this hope, what is this future that the resurrection promises, exactly what are we saved for?

The temptation is to think that it's all about what happens when we die. That because of Jesus being raised from the dead, we can know that death is not the end. That life goes on beyond this life. And yes, it is about that. That's a message I preach at every funeral service I take. That death is not the end. But the resurrection life offered by Jesus is so much more than that.

Jesus promised life in its fullness. He wasn't thinking just about the life beyond this world, but also our lives in this world. Our resurrection lives start now, and will continue beyond the grave.

We can see this in the example of Mary Magdalene and those first disciples. When they realised the truth of the resurrection they didn't just sit back and wait to die so that they could enter eternal life. They stood up and really started to live. They had a new motivation, a new power and a new hope. They were at last able to live the kinds of lives that Jesus had been talking about all along.

Living as a follower of Jesus is often seen as restrictive – as a Thou shalt not kind of life. But that is not what Jesus showed by his example or by his teaching. That is not the kind of life that those first disciples lived after the resurrection. They were filled with a joy and excitement; a purpose and a power.

They were motivated by a desire to share the love of God to all around – by word and by action. A desire to live as God had always intended us to live, placing others before ourselves and the good of all above selfish gain. And of course there is a recognition here that we won't always get things right – we are human and we do mess things up – but the important thing is that we needn't be defined by our mistakes.

This is the fullness of life that Jesus promised. This is the hope – a certain reality of God with us in all we are and all we do. This is the fullness of life his disciples enjoyed, and this is the fullness of life that is open to us. To enter into it all we have to do is to offer ourselves as his followers; put ourselves on that journey and allow him to change us as we travel on with him. Allow him to deal with all the demons of the past and give us opportunity and hope for the future – whatever that future might be.