

Readings:

Romans 6:3-11

Luke 24:1-12

Welcome to Easter Sunday! The highest point in our church year, the day for alleluias and confidence and celebration. Christ who was dead is alive. A whole new thing begins ...

To be honest, it's not a very promising beginning though, you'd have to admit. I love the honesty of the gospel accounts.

This morning's reading begins at the crack of dawn. Out into the still darkness a group of women make their way to a tomb, their steps stumbling, exhausted with grief. They cling to each other, hold each other up, determined to do what must be done for the man who had brought them together, this man they loved so dearly. They had stood together and watched as he died a terrible death. And now they come needing to tend to his body.

But what happened instead was strange and terrifying ... the tomb open! The blinding angels, the empty space where Jesus had been lain that strange question – “why do you look for the living among the dead?” and even stranger statement “He is risen!”

The accounts of the resurrection in our four Gospels are so fascinating. Luke tells us the most, describing Jesus appearing to the disciples as a group. John's stories are each deeply personal; heart-to-heart encounters with the risen Jesus for Mary, Thomas and Peter and how transformative those encounters were for each of them. Matthew gives only a brief summary before his grand ending with the Great Commission. And Mark, the earliest gospel, he didn't write about the resurrection at all.

Some of you with long memories will remember the furious debates that rocked the Christian world in the 1960s, as Bible scholars went public to say that you could still be a Christian and no longer accept that Jesus actually rose from the dead. They claimed that it is impossible, illogical and foolish to try to believe that his body simply vanished into thin air. They pointed to how different the accounts of the resurrection are between the four gospels, claimed that these stories were made up many years later and declared us free from the supernatural.

You may each have your own opinions on such matters. I hope you do. I'm keen to hear how you think about issues of belief, miracles and world views. My own conviction is that the power of God did physically raise Jesus from the dead, that his physical body was transformed in some way utterly unique in the history of the universe. My own conviction is that in this moment of

resurrection the power of God was released in a way that fundamentally changed the nature of what it means to be human.

I have been talking this Lent about being human. I have picked up on a few themes and asked you a few questions ... about who you experience yourself to be, how this has changed and is changing.

My question for you this morning is – where is God in relation to you?

If you were to draw a little stick figure drawing of yourself, how might you draw God on the page?

Before the resurrection, without the resurrection, there is a fundamental divide between human and divine worlds. The gods were essentially alien, mostly fickle, unreliable, often abusive. Gods were spiritual entities to be appeased, paid off, bargained with for access to spiritual power. In the Old Testament the Spirit of God was a power to be afraid of, as we see in the women's reaction to the shining angels – flat on your face on the ground terror! When God does break in to the human world, you'd better watch out!

Without the resurrection, your stick figure drawing might look like you on one side of a wall and God on the other ... God up in heaven where he belongs, not meddling in the mess of life down here!

It is my conviction that what the disciples of Jesus experienced in the days immediately following his death was something utterly new in human history. Their teacher, who they knew for a fact had gotten himself killed, was present with them in a really bizarre but really wonderful way.

They described this experience, in the words of the couple going to Emmaus in this way: "Were not our hearts burning within us?". Luke describes their "joy and amazement", Luke's gospel finishes with their great joy when they worshiped Jesus and praised God. I'll be talking next month about this statement (worshipping Jesus and praising God) because it is far more complex theologically than it sounds.

And Luke goes on as he writes the book of Acts to tell the incredible story of what happened next and how these disciples lead a movement which changed the world.

Then comes the apostle Paul, and things get even more interesting, because Paul had an amazing ability to put into words the experience of the risen Christ. Paul came to know the power and presence of God in a direct, personal way, which he was convinced was the very same personality and essence of the man Jesus of Nazareth. Paul was convinced that through his death on the cross this Jesus of Nazareth had fractured the very barrier between the human and the divine, and that his risen life created a current that flowed directly from God into human living, and involved ordinary human

beings in the heart of God's power and purposes. This had never been claimed before, never been experienced before.

Paul summed up this astonishing complex claim in two little words "in Christ". His brilliance was in expressing vastly complex ideas in simple ways, using timeless metaphors.

We are familiar with his most famous metaphor, the body of Christ. Paul pictured the risen Jesus as being like a living body, which was made up of all the people who choose to be part of it. As he saw groups of people working out how to be followers of Jesus Paul imagined them as actually all part of one body, which was both a human body and a divine body, both at the same time, with God's Spirit flowing through, connecting together people who wouldn't normally give each other the time of day, forming them into something astounding.

He described this as being "in Christ".

2000 years later it's just the same for us. We are part of something. We belong together with others and we experience the power and the presence of God in our midst, which we recognise as being the same nature as Jesus of Nazareth himself.

So if we were going to draw this as a picture of God and me on a piece of paper I might draw me as being surrounded by God. I might draw myself as being just one part of a bigger person.

But Paul also turned the metaphor around the other way. Yes we are part of Christ, we are 'in Christ'. But often, including our reading from Romans 6, Paul talks as though the risen Christ was in us. The metaphor is of an overlapping between my life and Jesus life

Read Romans 6:

we were baptized into union with Christ Jesus, we were baptized into union with his death. ⁴ By our baptism, then, we were buried with him and shared his death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from death by the glorious power of the Father, so also we might live a new life.

⁵ *... by being raised to life as he was.*

Paul's claim here is that the resurrection of Jesus was not so much a historical event, not just something that happened back then on Easter Sunday in the year 33. Paul's revolutionary theology, based on the experience of the early church, is that the resurrection of Jesus is something that keeps on happening over and over again in my life and in your life.

Being 'in Christ' is not an abstract theological idea, but it is a living reality within the very fibre of our bodies, within the thoughts of our brains, within the rhythm of our heart beat.

How might you draw this on your imaginary piece of paper? How do you know within the fabric of your everyday life something of the risen Christ? How much more could you live the life of the risen Christ, if you give him more space within your everyday life?

Paul's invitation is to surrender more and more of ourselves – he puts this in typically overstated Pauline dramatic style as 'putting to death our old selves' – being 'dead to sin' ... I would put this as creating more space for God, choosing as we can to side with love, to keep calm, to be curious about what God is doing, to trust the subtle nudges, to growing our 'yes' to Christ.

⁶ And we know that our old being has been put to death with Christ on his cross, in order that the power of the sinful self might be destroyed, ⁸ Since we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. ⁹ For we know that Christ has been raised from death and will never die again—death will no longer rule over him.

Paul's challenge is to be not so much in relationship with God, but to be utterly transformed by God. Perhaps the best way to show this with our imaginary piece of paper would be to in fact rip it in half! The power of the resurrection of Jesus Christ is indeed God entering into our lives, and us entering in God's life. But it goes further than that, towards an immersion of our very selves, our very being and identity, into the crucified and risen life of Christ. The resurrection of Jesus is indeed a historic event, a dramatic and unique moment in time. But it is so much more than that as we experience it in our own living and relating each day.