

Easter Day – 2020 – Matthew 28 and Colossian 3:1-4 – Bishop Richard Condie

“He is not here. He has been raised, as he said”. Words that changed the world forever. The words of the Angel at the empty tomb, to women who had come to properly attend to the dead body of their friend Jesus, who had been buried in haste on Friday night.

But the tomb was empty. The body not there. As the hymn says “angels in bright raiment had rolled the stone away, had kept the folded grave-clothes, where thy body lay. Lo, Jesus meets them, risen from the tomb; lovingly he greets them, scatters fear and gloom”.

Jesus met the disciples, that morning, and again and again in the days ahead. The evidence is overwhelming. He had conquered death. This is the great Easter Truth.

Thine be the glory, risen, conquering Son, endless is the victory thou o'er death hast won.

Death has come near in the last few months. The mounting death toll of Coronavirus is nothing short of staggering. I can't imagine being the Roman Catholic Bishop of Northern Italy this Easter with 60 of his priests dead from the virus. Thousands dying every day. Cases of infection rising all around us. The horror of New York city, hundreds dying each day.

Then there is the economic impact. Businesses shut down. Jobs lost. New York, The city that never shuts down, now a ghost town, with tumbleweed blowing down its usually congested streets. Predictions of up to 20% unemployment in Australia. Murmurings of recessions and the depression era.

The social impact of domestic violence, child sexual exploitation, mental health problems exploding, and loneliness on a scale we have not seen before.

No wonder we are feeling dislocated, disoriented, confused and sad. Our mortality and our fragility is writ large for all to see. COVID 19 says – all is not OK with the world. Many are filled with fear of contracting the illness, fear of dying and fear of what it means for our world.

Before this, we mostly lived our lives with never a thought of death. Most of us lived as if life would go on forever. Planning for tomorrow with a confident certainty. So, what has changed?

At one level nothing much at all. CS Lewis, a writer, theologian and public intellectual in the early 20th century, gave an address at Oxford University in 1939, just a month into the second world war; and it was called, “Learning in war time”. In it, he said this: “The war creates absolutely no new situation; it simply aggravates the permanent human situation so that we can no longer ignore it. Human life has always been lived on the edge of the precipice.”

And what observed of war, is true of coronavirus. There is no new situation here. Death has always been with us. 100% of us will certainly die. Uncertainty about tomorrow and the economic strength of our country has always been a factor. Loneliness and violence has

always been here. But COVID19 has aggravated the permanent human situation so we can no longer ignore it.

We live our lives on the edge of a precipice. The precipice of uncertainty, of fragility, of death, of crisis, of alarm, and ambiguity.

Mostly, living in the wealthy west, we are shielded from the precipice. Last year I was in India, where children regularly die of preventable diseases, many go without food, clean water and toilets. Where death and disease and disfigurement are daily realities. Where uncertainty and fragility are close at hand.

Domestic violence is aggravated in the coronavirus lockdown but is a scourge that inflicts our nation at all times, with one woman dying at the hand of her partner every week. The sex trafficking of children is a growing problem in our sick world.

While we have been fretting over COVID19, it has escaped most of us that Kenya, Ethiopia, Uganda and Somalia are suffering right now from an unprecedented locust plague. The swarms of locusts consuming everything in their path, threatening the food security and the future of those countries their lives and economies. And that is in the news, this week!

Lewis was right: “The war (we might insert, “On COVID19”) creates absolutely no new situation; it simply aggravates the permanent human situation so that we can no longer ignore it. Human life has always been lived on the edge of the precipice.”

So what of Easter Sunday? And what of the world turning moment when the angel said “He is not here. He has been raised, as he said”?

The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, declares victory over the precipice of living, the precipice of suffering, the precipice of death. *Thine be the glory, risen, conquering Son, endless is the victory thou o'er death hast won.*

That first Easter morning, the grief of Jesus' followers, who had witnessed his cruel torture and death on the previous Friday, whose hopes had been dashed, whose dreams had been shattered, gave way to joy. Their fear melted away, their uncertainty, and insecurity, replaced by inner peace.

There is a popular Easter Song that says: Because He lives, I can face tomorrow. Because He lives all fear is gone. Because I know He holds the future, And life is worth the living just because He lives.

Our reading this morning from Colossians 3 reminds us of the trajectory of resurrection, the cosmic dimensions of what happened that day. Because Jesus conquered death, by resurrection to new life, he now rules over the world. He is seated at the right hand of the Father in heaven. And because he rules over the world, he will one day return in glory to judge the world, and usher in a glorious redeemed future.

The resurrection of Jesus, in addition to being the fulcrum of the world's history, is also the defining moment in the cosmos behind our history. It is the crowning moment for the Lord Jesus. His full glory on display to the world.

But it also says that OUR lives can be caught up in HIS resurrection life. If today you are a believer in Jesus, the truth is, you have begun your resurrection life with him. His resurrection the first Easter morning is a sign of your own resurrection on the last day.

Here is a promise for followers of Jesus. While we are not immune from the precipice of life and death. While we will suffer and die physically. While locust plagues and family violence and loneliness, and viruses still come our way – our eternal future is secure. "Your life is hidden with Christ in God" Paul says in Colossians 3. Our lives are held secure in his hand. We are enveloped by him, and will be carried to that great day, when we will be revealed with him in glory.

I've often thought of this verse like catching an aeroplane. We enter into the plane in one place. Our lives are hidden with fuselage. And when we get to our destination, we walk out into another world, another place. With Christ, our lives are hidden with him as we journey through life, so that when we get to our ultimate destination, when Christ is revealed, we will emerge with him in glory. That doesn't mean we are immune in the aeroplane from living and dying but it does mean we are secure till we get to the other side.

The promise of the scriptures is that one day there will be a renewed creation. This is the picture painted in Revelation Chapter 21. "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; ... And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

"See, the home of God is among mortals.

He will dwell with them as their God;

they will be his peoples,

and God himself will be with them;

⁴ he will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Death will be no more;

mourning and crying and pain will be no more,

for the first things have passed away."

We believe that, that day, when tears are wiped, death is removed, mourning and crying and pain are past, is the day for which we are being prepared in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

Oh, how we need that day. Oh, how we need the promise of that day, to get through the precipice of life. Oh, how we need a sure and certain hope of resurrection, to make it to the end.

And as I look for that day, I make sense of the now. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians "...this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure".

All the talk of death, and the uncertainty of our economic future, and the difficulties we face, the fleeting fragility of life as it has always been, is put into perspective by this future hope – hope of an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure.

God is with you in grit now. He is at the bedside of every ventilated person struggling for life with COVID19. He is there calming our anxious fears. He is there groaning alongside the unemployed with no future. He weeps with those who mourn without going to the graveside. He shares the pain of parents who can't attend their child's wedding. He sparks the creativity of those re-imagining their businesses. He sustains our healthcare workers to serve another day. He sits beside our leaders as they make tough decisions. He walks alongside us in our precarious life.

AND he secures our future glory. And his sure promise of the future puts all our current pain into perspective.

It could well be that you are watching this Easter Day broadcast and are not a follower of Jesus. You may even be a sceptic, or just looking on out of curiosity. Perhaps like CS Lewis you have found COVID19 has "aggravated the permanent human situation so that you can no longer ignore it" and you are looking for something to get through the precipice of life.

Whoever you are, we'd love you to know more. We would love for you to have the eternal security and perspective to weather this storm and the future precipices of your own life with a quiet faith-filled confidence.

Today we want to offer you a copy of the Bible to read, so you can make up your own mind about the resurrection of Jesus and his promise of hope for the world. Please email us, and we will gladly send you one.

Many of our churches will be offering on-line courses after Easter explaining the Christian Hope. Some offer the Alpha course and some offer Christianity Explored. Again, please contact us for details of those courses, the links are below.

"He is not here. He has been raised, as he said" - Words that changed the world. Christ is Risen. We can be raised with him, and have our lives hidden in Christ, to be revealed when he is revealed in glory. This is our Easter Hope. Christ is Risen, He is Risen indeed.