

**End or Beginning?**  
**Rev Jenny Wilkens**  
**Easter Day 6am**  
**16 April 2017**  
*Matthew 28:1-10*



[http://www.stlukesinthecity.org.nz/sermons\\_pid\\_22.html](http://www.stlukesinthecity.org.nz/sermons_pid_22.html)

Well, here we are at the climax of the great 3 days of the Triduum, at the conclusion of the long season of Lent and the slow descent into Passion of Holy Week. From the depths, we now rise with Christ to the heights, we celebrate the pinnacle of the Christian year, the very peak of our Christian story.

But perhaps after a week of such emotional journeying with Christ, we get to Easter Day with a sigh of relief and think, phew, it's all over! Whereas in fact what the New Testament proclaims through the early Christian community is that the resurrection of Jesus is only the beginning. Just as our season of Eastertide goes on through 50 days of celebration to Pentecost, so Easter is to be for us a lifestyle, that 'we are an Easter people and Alleluia is our song'<sup>1</sup>!

This year our Easter Day Gospel comes from the Gospel of Matthew.

Most biblical scholars assume that Mark's Gospel is the earliest of the 4 gospels, followed by Matthew and Luke, and then finally John.

Matthew's gospel stays closest to Mark, which therefore makes any additions and changes all the more interesting. Each of these additions extends the earlier story of Mark in order to attend to concerns of the specific community for whom Matthew was writing. And the willingness to adapt that earlier story to present needs and circumstances isn't just an interesting historical detail or even just a helpful interpretive lens through which to read the scene – though it is certainly that – it is also an example for all those called to proclaim the truth and meaning of Christ's resurrection ever since. We are called to be faithful to the earlier accounts of the resurrection precisely by retelling it in a way that addresses the circumstances and lives of present-day hearers with the dynamic and life-changing truth of God's work in raising Jesus Christ from the dead.

**Mark's** account is often spare and cuts to the action. **Matthew's** depiction of the scene is somewhat more dramatic and in a way that Cantabrians can identify with! Just like at his crucifixion (Mt 27:51, 53), Jesus' resurrection is accompanied by 'a great earthquake' - no wonder the guards shook!

I sometimes wonder if Matthew had had personal experience of earthquakes

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<sup>1</sup> Various attributed to St Augustine and Pope John Paul II.

to have realised what a dramatic picture of cosmic upheaval this was. **Mark's** messenger to the women who have come to the tomb is a young man in a white robe; **Matthew** makes it clear that this is a divine messenger. It is no less than the angel of the Lord descending from heaven with an appearance like lightning and clothing white as snow, who rolls back the stone and sits on it. This suggests a being of superhuman height. Matthew (27:62-66) has already told us that temple guards had been positioned at the tomb to prevent Jesus' disciples trying to steal his body and then claiming he had been raised from the dead. But in an almost comic touch, it's the guards who are meant to be on alert who fall to the ground with fear and become like dead men, while the one who is meant to be a dead man is now alive!

Matthew's resurrection witnesses are two women, Mary Magdalene and 'the other Mary' who is not further identified, which is a bit of a pity, although the other gospels speak of a number of different Marys. These two Mary's had been witnesses of Jesus' burial in the tomb by Joseph of Arimathea (Mt 27:61).

They too are given reassurance by the angel, Do not be afraid, I know you are looking for Jesus who was crucified, he is not here, he has been raised. And then two crucial instructions: first, **come and see** the place where he lay, that he is not there; and secondly, **go and tell** his disciples he has been raised from the dead and is going ahead of you to Galilee, there you will see him.

In **Mark's** gospel the women fled from the tomb in terror and said nothing to anyone for they were afraid (Mk 16:8). Of course we know that once they'd got over their shock, the women did in due course go and share the good news.

**Matthew** tells us the women "left the tomb quickly *with fear and great joy*" (28:8). Isn't that a wonderful reminder that fear and joy are not in fact opposites but, just as with doubt and faith, can be experienced at one and the same time?

Fear is much "in the air" in our world in these days and for all kinds of reasons. Jesus' resurrection does not spell an end to fear for those who follow him, but rather makes it possible for us to experience deep inner joy amid what might otherwise be crippling fear. Resurrection doesn't simply answer or end all our problems, but rather it creates the possibility of something new. Our Christian faith does not remove us from the hardships, limitations, and challenges of this life, but creates for us possibilities that simply would not be available had God not intervened, first in the raising of Jesus and again by entering into our own lives.

I love the lines in the beautiful “Lord it is night’ prayer in our NZ Prayer Book (p. 184), which say “The night heralds the dawn. Let us look expectantly to a new day, new joys, new possibilities.” That could have been written about Easter morning.

Can we then hear in our Easter acclamation, “Christ is Risen,” an invitation to see new possibilities *in Christ* in the people and situations around us in our world? Christ’s resurrection does not miraculously take the harsh realities of our world away, but it does make it possible to experience joy in the midst of them, as we work with God towards new creation in our lives and world.

It was this *joy* that gave the women the impetus to follow the instructions of the angel, first to “come and see” and then to “go and tell”. Yes, they were offered comfort, do not be afraid, but more than that, they were given a task to live out, a purpose to fulfil, a part to play in sharing the good news of the resurrection, and that God is in the business of bringing new life from death, new hope from despair. So too we can meet the challenges before us in our world with confidence and courage and joy, knowing that the God who raised Jesus from the dead is not finished with this world yet. Not finished with the world God loves so much, and not finished with us, the children of God, whom God loves so much.

Perhaps that is why **Matthew** has the risen Jesus meet the women as they are full-tilt on their way to carry out their task and spread the good news. Jesus’ greeting to them is actually quite a casual familiar ‘Hello’; the women’s response is somewhat more formal, yet still intimate – they came to him, touched him and worshipped him.

And just so, Jesus meets us as we are on the road of our discipleship, perhaps just as suddenly at times, just as unexpectedly, and Jesus reassures us of his love and reiterates to us our call, “do not be afraid, go and tell...”. So Easter Day for those women, for all Jesus’ disciples, for us, is not the end of the story, but rather the beginning of ongoing working together with God in witness to the risen Lord Jesus.

The theologian Karl Barth once said that “the goal of human life is not death, but resurrection.” Death does not have the final word. God is still in the resurrection business, still leading us forward into new life and new possibility, new hope and love. Easter is not over, it is on-going, and perhaps the best response for 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians to make to that good news is the 1<sup>st</sup> century response,

“Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!” Amen.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> With thanks to David Lose for his thoughts which inspired this sermon:  
<http://www.davidlose.net/2017/04/easter-a-proclaiming-an-on-going-easter/>