

Easter Day, 1st April 2018: St Albans Abbey

Mark 16. 1-8

Today is one of those rare occasions when Easter Day falls on the 1st April. That only happened four times in the last century, the last time being in 1956.

As a child I remember my parents laughing about the April Fools' spoof produced by BBC TV's Panorama, which featured a Swiss family harvesting their spaghetti trees.

The problem nowadays is that with the growth of 'fake news' people don't always know what to believe. St Mark proclaims the extraordinary news that Jesus, who had been crucified, has been raised from the dead. Is it a hoax? Could this be fake news too?

Well, if I were recording those events I certainly wouldn't do it in the way that Mark does. His gospel splutters to an end in confusion, bewilderment and terror.

- If you were making it up, you would never have two women discovering an empty tomb because in the law of the time women weren't able to appear in court as witnesses and their testimony would be dismissed.
- And why would two women go to the tomb when, by their own admission, they couldn't roll the huge stone away from the entrance?
- When they do arrive and see the young man dressed in white, they don't fall to their knees in instant belief. Instead they run for their lives, scared out of their wits.
- And then, far from believing and proclaiming the good news of Jesus' resurrection, they don't dare tell anyone anything of what they had seen.

You could hardly think of a more depressing finale than the one we have in Mark. And yet it is precisely because of these things that the gospels have such power and authenticity. Even though the disciples had been told that Jesus would be killed and raised to new life, they simply didn't believe it – at least not at first.

It's all too tempting for us to dismiss these first century Galileans as naïve and gullible. We conveniently forget that one of the main schools of religious teaching, the Sadducees, held that there is no resurrection. They weren't stupid: they'd seen death often enough and they knew that dead bodies don't come back to life.

The Gospel accounts were not invented by a group of people who fooled themselves into believing the unbelievable. They were men and women who had been confronted unexpectedly, astonishingly with the God who enters into our broken world, into situations where everything seems hopeless, bringing light and hope.

The heartbeat of Christianity is not some vague notion that things might get better, but which has no basis in reality. Almost forty years ago the Monty Python satire *Life of Brian* upset a lot of Christians especially the crucifixion scene at the end. You may recall the controversial scene where one of the thieves hanging on a cross next to the crucified Brian tells him to cheer up. The thief breaks into a jolly song, *Always look on the Bright side of life*.

But the film spectacularly missed the point. Groundless optimism such as that does not and cannot offer real comfort and solace. As we look around the world it is certainly easy to lapse into despair. In the past few weeks alone we have seen 17 students killed in a shooting spree in Florida; innocent civilians slaughtered in East Ghouda and Afrin; and nerve gas used to attack two people in Salisbury. And in the past year we've seen terrorist attacks in London and in Manchester, as well as the Grenfell Tower disaster. In the face of such events, like the first disciples, we too might be tempted to give in to despair.

Yet greater than such acts of evil are the actions of self-giving love. We saw a graphic example of this just ten days ago when a gunman took hostages in a supermarket in Trèbes in the south of France. Lieutenant-Colonel Arnaud Beltrame, a 44 year old gendarme, offered to swap places with one of the women hostages, knowing that three hostages had already been killed. Tragically the gunman stabbed and shot the policeman and he died of his wounds. His self-sacrifice has spoken powerfully to people of all cultures and religions across the world. It has emerged that he was a practising Christian and what inspired him to offer his own life for another was nothing less than the example of Jesus Christ.

Jesus's resurrection confounded the first disciples, just as it confounds people today. It is God's promise that his love is more powerful than the worst that evil can throw at us. His love will overcome all things and will triumph. For Arnaud Beltrame death is not extinction but the door to eternity and life with God.

And resurrection hope is not just about the future: it is also a reality to be lived out here and now. People of all faiths – and none – find a multitude of ways to

support communities who need help. But for us as Christians, it is the victory of Christ which inspires people the world over to acts of self-giving love. I think of the numerous food banks, credit unions, children's groups, lunch-clubs for the elderly and work with the homeless that are supported by the churches of this diocese right across Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire, as well as the countless untold acts of neighbourliness and compassion. These are all examples of resurrection life bubbling up in the midst of a fearful world beset with anxiety. Such is the power of the resurrection of Christ at work among us today.

This is not fake news – it is good news.

So this morning, as we gather in company with millions of Christians across the globe, let us proclaim afresh the good news of Christ's resurrection. And let us pray for grace to be Easter people who live out his resurrection in our daily lives with joy.

The Lord is risen! He is risen indeed, alleluia!