

A Sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

+ Easter Day Sermon 2011

Colossians 3.1-4          John 20.1-8

*Risen Lord Jesus, meet us now as we ponder your word.  
As you spoke to the heart of Mary Magdalene when you called her  
by name,  
so speak intimately into the heart of each person in this church  
with the message we need to hear.  
We ask this for your love's sake.*

A very joyful Ester to you all!

This is the most important day in the Christian year. It's the day which makes us into believers; it's the day our faith hangs on.

I remember, years ago arranging flowers at Easter time in my home church with a lady called Mrs Francis. She spoke rather sadly, and said something like this: 'I can understand Christmas... but this is all too much for me to believe.'

But truthfully, if there had never been an Easter, would we really celebrate Christmas? If something decisively different hadn't happened in the history of the world some 2,000 years ago at a tomb in Jerusalem, would Jesus be remembered as anything more than a good prophet? There have been many good prophets and teachers in the history of the world, and much of what they have said chimes in very well with what Jesus taught; that's why we

can welcome hearing about them in our multi-cultural and multi-faith society. For my part, when I listen to 'Thought for the Day' on the radio in the morning, I'm always glad to hear what Indarjit Singh, the Sikh speaker has to say – the Gurus of his faith seem to have spoken and written so wisely and eloquently of peace and good will between people of different backgrounds that their teaching can be very inspiring even for non-Sikhs. As far as I know, the Gurus' birthdays get celebrated, too – but it's not like Christmas: it's not like our celebration of God himself getting involved in the world, bound up in a human life, coming to be with us unrepeatably and absolutely. With Jesus' birth there was something *different* from the birth of any other prophet or teacher. And how are we *sure* that he is so different? ... Because of Easter.

When Jesus the carpenter was raised from the dead, God the Father was saying 'Yes!' to all that he was, all that he is. God was saying to any who would accept it, 'here, in this man who was crucified, is my wisdom... my power... my very self – he's alive: put your trust in him.'

The event was hidden away: it didn't make the news. Only a few were ready to hear and accept it on the first Easter Day. But soon, very soon, many more hearts and minds were opened. 'Jesus has been raised from death!' was at the centre of the Gospel which the disciples preached all around the Mediterranean, and further afield, and those with ears to hear this truth, and inner eyes – that is, eyes of the heart - to see it, found their lives turned upside down; and they then set about turning the world upside down as well.

But why should we believe it - that Jesus rose from the dead?

Wasn't Mrs Francis right? Isn't it all a bit incredible? When you see someone dead, they may look at peace – but they also look very dead. It all seems so final. How could Jesus have conquered that stark reality? How can he give us faith that God can conquer the natural biological limitation to our very existence? How can we trust the reports of that small band who said they saw him alive after his burial – and whose stories don't all match up, anyway?

Well, first of all we can believe it *because* their stories don't match up in every detail. If the resurrection of Jesus was a tale concocted to found a religion, or to keep the memory of a revered man alive, we should expect those who concocted it to have put about their authorised version, and that version only. But these varying accounts of the events of the first Easter morning and the days which followed, confused and contradictory as they are, bear witness to the memories of a varied group of people, remembering and half-remembering: they don't have the stamp of a single author, nor of an inner circle who were determined to keep the Jesus-movement going by promoting a fiction.

Secondly, we can believe it because these varying memories all coalesce on a constant theme: that Jesus' tomb was empty, and that people were meeting him – and being transformed by their meeting. From grief to joy, from confusion to conviction, from doubt to faith, from the brokenness of guilty memories to the courage of

people who'd been given a message – a message of unimaginable hope.

The church was born from the womb of Jesus' tomb. And the church, for all its many faults and failings, is the best evidence that something remarkable happened that spring morning in a garden near Jerusalem's execution site. God broke into human history decisively. And the fact that you and I are here this morning is part of the proof of that.

There are some people, of course, who want to say our faith is all based on a mistake – or a hoax: Jesus didn't die, some of them argue. He was taken from the cross in a coma, and then revived in the tomb, to be rescued – by Mary Magdalene, perhaps – and then go off and live a new life with her somewhere else.

You know, that's just not possible. The wounds inflicted by crucifixion are such as no-one could hope to recover from. I won't appal you with the details on this bright Easter morning – but they couldn't have been healed by even the best doctors of those days (who, in truth, could probably heal very few things effectively). And it's more or less incredible that Roman soldiers would have mistaken a comatose victim for a dead one, anyway. They were experts in death, and quite unsentimental. The Gospel of John tells us that they ensured Jesus was dead by thrusting a spear into his side – at which not the blood of a pumping heart, but blood and watery fluid gushed out, testimony to biological catastrophe. And this bit of information, whose medical significance could scarcely have been understood by the Gospel writer, is one that he most especially tells us was attested by a reliable witness.

There need be no doubt in our minds that Jesus was dead – and then he was alive and meeting people again. More than five hundred people at one time, St Paul tells us, in what is probably the oldest written record we have of the resurrection.

Something extraordinary happened at the first Easter – and it's the basis of our faith – it's the basis of our lives, as we put our trust in the Risen Jesus, God's great 'Yes!' to humanity.

There are many people today who say that faith is futile, misguided, and even dangerous. They wonder how anyone can be so foolish as to believe in God. Very often these opponents of faith start with the big picture – they challenge us over our belief that there is a creator of the universe. They suggest that belief in God doesn't sit well with science. And then, there's always the problem of believing in a God of love in the face of the destructiveness we see around us in the world. How can we make sense of that?

But, you know, my faith doesn't start with the big picture. I don't start with God, and then try to fit Jesus into the story. My faith starts in that garden, around two thousand years ago. What happened there says 'Yes!' to all I find so compelling about Jesus of Nazareth whom I meet in the Gospels - compelling and challenging, puzzling and wonderful. He's the one who has a hold on my imagination and my heart; and the resurrection says 'Yes!' to that.

Some years ago pious Christians used to put bumper stickers on their cars: you don't see them so much nowadays, at least not in England. But one of them said: 'Thank God for Jesus'. It would much better have read, 'Thank Jesus for God'. Because it's starting with Jesus – with Jesus crucified and risen – that we can begin to fathom the fact of God, and something of his nature.

I don't pretend to have answers to all the big questions – some tidy theological 'theory of everything'. It's almost certainly a mistake to think you can have that, although some great minds have tried. I used to be what's laughably called a 'systematic theologian': but the truth is that no system of thinking can ever catch the mystery behind the universe completely in its meshes. So our faith doesn't start with having an explanation for all the difficult issues. There can be plenty of loose ends and admissions of ignorance in the faith of someone who starts in the garden of that first Easter day. If you put yourself there, alongside Mary Magdalene, you can simply be gripped by the astounding hope that Jesus is alive; he's calling each of us by name to put our trust in him - and let that change our lives – for good – for ever.