



ST HELIERS CHURCH
& COMMUNITY CENTRE



TAKEAWAY SUNDAY SERMON

Sunday 16th April 2023, Easter

A new birth into a living hope by Rev Dr Jordan Redding

Scripture readings

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed. Although you have not seen him, you love him, and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

1 Peter 1:3-9

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors were locked where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” **John 20:19-24**

I hope you all had a relaxing and enjoyable Easter weekend. Typically, we think of Easter as the holiday weekend that's just passed. A day when we gather to celebrate how Jesus rose from the dead and instructed us all to go out and hide chocolate eggs in memory of him. And we've been doing so faithfully ever since.

But it's worth remembering that, in the church calendar, Easter is a *season* as much as it is one day – it's the period of time that begins with Jesus being raised from the dead and ends with the pouring out of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. It's the church's way of saying that Easter isn't just something that happened in the past to Jesus. It's very much a lived and present reality, which affects our experience of everyday life now.

That conviction is at the heart of the book in the Bible we know as First Peter. Because Jesus has been raised, Peter exhorts, "*we have been given a new birth*", "*we are protected by the power of God through faith*", and "*we are receiving the salvation of our souls, which is the outcome of our faith*". So, resurrection is something ongoing.

But here's the question I've been grappling with: in what sense is that true? How exactly is our experience of reality different because Jesus rose? At Easter Time, we proclaim triumphantly that sin, suffering, death is defeated, but there still seems to be an awful lot of sin, suffering, and death to go around.

I've been struggling with that question lately. Both in my pastoral work and in my personal life. I want it so badly to be true that the power that raised Jesus from the dead is undoing the power of suffering and death now in a tangible and visible way. But so often that doesn't seem to be the case...

In our reading today, Peter is writing to people who are suffering. In his case, the early church community was facing increased persecution, discrimination, even death. And into this context, he talks about the power of the resurrection in terms of hope. Resurrection now is hope.

We use the word "hope" a lot in everyday language, from the most trivial things (*I hope it doesn't rain today, I hope the sermon doesn't go on too long*) to the biggest, most serious things (*I hope my health improves, I hope I can afford groceries this week, I hope my family visits, I hope...*)

Hope can be a powerful thing. It's a projection of what we want to come to pass. Our wishing, imagining, dreaming, desiring. It spurs us on. Keeps us moving forward. Keep us from stagnating. From wallowing.

The thing is, no matter how much we hope for something, we can't force it to fruition. We can hasten toward it, but we can't guarantee it will come true anymore than we can control when it rains. And ultimately, for all of us, all our hopes and dreams for life run up against the impenetrable barrier of death. Even Jesus died and experienced the agony of God-abandonment.

In the dark night of the soul, even hope can elude us. The spark goes out and we despair with nothing left in the tank to keep on keeping on. Hope dies.

So, it seems to me significant that Peter doesn't simply talk about "hope". Rather, he says, "through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, we have been given a new birth...into a *living hope*."

I've been dwelling on that term "living hope". Why "living hope" and not just "hope"? "Living" hope suggests to me something different. It suggests this hope has a life of its own beyond us; something that is more certain, more sure than whatever we have tucked away somewhere inside us...

This hope is something so real, so living, that it's not born inside us... we're born *into it*. It's language of baptism. Of new birth.

You know the imagery of baptism is so replete in First Peter that some scholars believe the letter was originally a baptism liturgy. And that it was subsequently converted into a letter for the benefit of the wider church. Others believe it's more likely that the letter includes fragments of a sermon delivered on the occasion of a baptism. But most agree that this letter is an insight into the symbolism of baptism in the early church.

And we heard today: *we have been given a new birth*. That is the central image of baptism. In baptism we are symbolically lowered beneath the waters as a sharing in Christ's death, and we are raised out again as a sharing in his new life. For Peter, this imagery is at heart of what "resurrection now" means. It means we are participating in the life of Jesus. *His* life is like a magnetic pole towards which our whole existence is oriented.

Eastern Orthodox Christianity gets this much more easily than Western Christianity does. Take a look at the Eastern icon on the front page of your order of service. Iconography is one of the ways that the Eastern Church conveys theology.

This is an icon of Jesus' baptism by Ukrainian artist Lyuba Latskiv. I wonder what you notice. One of the first things I noticed is that the river in which Jesus is baptised looks less like a river and more like ... a tomb? A tomb which he is walking out from. In fact, if you look carefully into the river, you can see the souls of the dead. We're literally looking into Hades, the land of the dead.

In this icon, the artist is inviting us to contemplate the fact that in his baptism, Jesus' life has been fused to ours. He lives in solidarity with us as one who has walked the path before us.

His living is the same as our living; his suffering and frailty the same as our suffering and frailty; his dying and his death is the same as our death. And therefore, if Jesus really was raised at Easter – so Peter would have us believe – then we can

reasonably expect that will be our fate too. In Jesus, we see through the impenetrable barrier of suffering, death and dying. Hades' gates have been thrown open and the light of God's life is breaking in.

Analogies quickly escape us but here's one I was made aware of. I owe it to Thomas Belt in a recent blog he wrote. If any of you were runners back in the day, you might know of Roger Bannister. In 1954, Bannister became the first athlete to break the 4-minute mile. Thing is, once he accomplished it others quickly followed in his stead. What was thought impossible (breaking the 4-minute barrier) subsequently became commonplace. It was as if the floodgates had opened. And the breaking forth of achievement after Bannister was of no coincidence; his paving the way opened up new possibilities for others.

In a similar way, we could talk of what Jesus has accomplished. By faith, he walked the path of suffering. By faith, he experienced the dark night of the soul. By faith, he entered into death. And on Easter day, in faithfulness, God raised Jesus to life, fulfilling the promises of scripture. His way is our way.

For us on this side of the grave, there is still much uncertainty, much sorrow, much pain. But in solidarity with Christ there is only one endpoint, one conclusion, one result. There is no uncertainty here, for Peter, for our hope is a living hope through Christ the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

And so, we come to baptise Archie. Through the sign of baptism, we are saying emphatically that every aspect of Archie's life is shared by Jesus Christ, kissed with the light of resurrection and new creation. This is the promise we're declaring and sealing over his life. We are placing him within a sure and certain hope in the name of Father, Son, and Spirit, who is making all things new. Amen.