



ST HELIERS CHURCH  
& COMMUNITY CENTRE

# + ◦ TAKEAWAY ◦ SUNDAY SERMON

**Sunday 9<sup>th</sup> April 2023, Easter**

**The Great What If by Rev Dr Jordan Redding**

**Gospel reading: Matthew 28:1-10**

*28 After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. 2 And suddenly there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. 3 His appearance was like lightning and his clothing white as snow. 4 For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men.*

*5 But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. 6 He is not here, for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. 7 Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' This is my message for you." 8 So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy and ran to tell his disciples. 9 Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshipped him. 10 Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers and sisters to go to Galilee; there they will see me."*

---

Have you ever wondered, what if certain events of history had never happened or had happened differently? For instance, *what if Hitler had won World War II? Or what if Franz Ferdinand had never been assassinated?*

If you have, you'd be in good company. Apparently, there's a growing discipline of studying history that never happened. It's called "counterfactual history" or "counterfactualism". It is the process of asking "what if?".

And it's nothing new either. The ancient Roman historian, Livy, asked *what if Alexander the Great invaded Rome?* So, we human beings love to speculate. And if we have done so for the big events of history, how much more often do we embark on the same imaginative thinking in our own lives. *What if I had pursued my dream as a musician? What if I hadn't moved here? What if I'd married that person instead? What if? What if? What if?*

We might be quick to dismiss this kind of historical speculation as mere conjecture and wishful thinking. Surely its use is limited, even problematic – when we confuse fiction with history. It's even dangerous – especially in our world of misinformation and alternative truths. Is "counterfactualism" not another word for "alternative facts"? And that's a very valid criticism.

There's another perspective though that has been put forward by Professor Nandini Das among others. She recently wrote an opinion piece arguing that, while these critiques are valid, the act of asking, *what if*, can be a very enlightening and empowering process.

And she argues that all history is limited by what has actually been passed down, whose perspectives have been recorded, as well as by the questions that the historians ask. No history, in other words, is neutral and without imaginative interpretation.

We are all products of our time, historians included. And they are working with limited historical material that inevitably amplifies certain perspectives over others.

Professor Das goes on to argue that, particularly for those whose voices have been muted throughout history, asking *what if* can be a powerful tool to challenge unquestioned assumptions and to open us up to new perspectives, new sets of questions, and new possibilities for the future.

What does this all have to do with Easter? Well, the story of Easter presents us with such a *what if*. *What if* Jesus rose from the dead?

Right from the beginning, Matthew presents us with two emerging narratives of that event. We heard one just now: the account of the two Mary's, who encounter crucified Jesus, who is now inexplicably alive.

The other narrative follows straight afterwards. If you read the rest of the chapter, you'll see that the prison guards go to the chief priests who

develop their own account of events. This is the version where Jesus wasn't really raised from the dead; the version in which the disciples are con artists, stealing Jesus' body away in order to begin a resurrection conspiracy that might fuel a revolution.

It strikes me that, if you're looking for a more plausible narrative, this second one fits the bill. Let's be honest, it's the version of events that fits neatly within the world as we know it. The rational world in which bodies aren't resurrected and the dead stay dead. It's the version that for the most part fits our expectations, personal experience and scientific explanation.

So based on all of that, we might be quite justified in sympathising with the version of events in which Jesus stays dead.

But then there's this other narrative. And Matthew's pretty upfront that his sympathies lie here – with this counterfactual history that the gospels, each in their own way, witness to and utterly convinced of.

An account of events which arises not from the centre of power. In fact, the first witnesses are two women: in patriarchal Roman society was hardly an authoritative source of truth. And their witness is confirmed by a small group of uneducated Jews from the backwater of the Roman Empire. These unlikely witnesses who were adamant that their rabbi, Jesus of Nazareth, had risen from the dead. So adamant that they lived and died for that belief.

There is of course no proof of this account of events. In fact, in a world where death reigns, there's something irrational at the heart of their claim. And yet, how this great *what if* has changed the course of history! The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is history's great *what if*.

*What if* suffering and death is not the final word?

*What if* things can't be reduced to scientific formulae and a rational system of cause and effect?

*What if* this world is more than a cold hunk of rock hurtling through space and life is more than just meaningless?

*What if* there is a God who is not satisfied with abandoning us to our fate? Not satisfied with the endless cycles of violence and injustice?

*What if* God is birthing new life in this world? And what if it is coming through those who are disempowered, overlooked, unheard, oppressed? What if God is overturning the way things are and inviting us to be part of it?

The list could go on. Today Christians all over the world are gathering to celebrate that we are people of the great *what if*; that we are unashamedly irrational because our compass is oriented not to this world as it is, but the world as it could be ... if the grave really was empty. The world as it is becoming and will be in the fullness of time.

We can see that the act of asking *what if* is more than mere speculation. It is life-changing as we are oriented from death to life, from despair to hope, from self-preservation to selfless love. That's proof enough for me that this resurrection is something to contend with.

In the two narratives Matthew presents to us, I choose the irrational one every time. I'm captivated by it. Bound to it. Inspired by it...

...Today we have the joy of baptising Archie Dippenaar. And it's really fitting that we do this on Easter Sunday. In the early church Easter Sunday was the occasion when baptisms were celebrated. And that's because baptism is a symbol of our being raised to new life with Christ. Resurrection now.

The lowering beneath the water and being raised out of it is a symbolic enactment of our dying with Christ and our being raised to new life with him. In other words, we are people born into this resurrection reality. A people whose imagination and life together is being shaped by the great, *what if*.

We are people of a living hope, refusing to be satisfied with the way the world is, and opening ourselves up to a new way of living.

Christ is risen! And the people say: *he is risen indeed!*