

## Easter Day Sermon Bishop Karen

I once saw a cartoon of two Roman soldiers guarding Jesus' tomb on the first Easter morning. Each had a mug of tea in his hand, and the sun was just rising above the horizon. One is encouraging the other, 'Cheer up, it's Sunday morning. As I see it, we have one more day of guarding the tomb. By Monday the whole thing will blow over.'

Maybe that is how we are feeling today about the current situation we find ourselves in with Corvid-19. Hoping that it will all blow over very soon, but then we wake up the next day realising that we are still living in lockdown. In some ways this year Good Friday has been and gone, but we still feel like we are there, with the inability to celebrate Easter Day with friends, or sing 'alleluia's in our churches or receive Holy Communion or admire the flowers after the drabness of Lent. So what is different about Easter day when it feels just like any other day we have had these last few weeks?

The important thing is that on this day we continue to read: A moment later Mary Magdalene and another woman called Mary came to check the tomb. As they arrived '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. His appearance was like lightening and his clothing was as white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, 'Do not be afraid; for I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised.' Matthew 28: 1 -6

The world is astonished that millions of Christians celebrate Easter with such excitement, and that is why the way we celebrate today really matters! Have we shouted 'alleluia' from an open window, or placed flowers on our front door or stuck a message on the window? Because, like those guards at the tomb in the cartoon, people will assume that 'By Monday the whole thing will blow over.' Only we know that it doesn't. The more we enjoy this life the more we enjoy Easter and that is the hope we are called to keep alive at this time not only for ourselves but for our local communities too; for those in our hospitals or isolated at home; for those working so hard they barely have time to think; for those whose hope is dying as they look around at the suffering and feeling utterly helpless.

As Christians we already have much to rejoice about in this life. God loves us, we are forgiven, we can find the power of the Holy Spirit touching our lives and freeing us to love others. Why make so much then of Easter Day?

Look at it this way. The more we enjoy the love of God, the more we sense that this world cannot be all that God has in mind for us. Yes, there is war, cruelty in families, injustice, people hating one another, brokenness all around and, at this time, we also acknowledge that not only is the world imperfect but our own bodies are frail, can get sick and miserable and as we grow older we watch our loved ones grow old and die and we know that our turn is coming. If God really loves us, he must surely have something better in mind.

And to add to that feeling of introspection and human desolation even when we are healthy we are often frustrated because we are not free to attain what we would love to achieve. We begin with great plans and aspirations, and we have some successes, but we are aware that even they turn sour, and we can slowly find ourselves hemmed in.

Now we can begin to see that the resurrection of Jesus from the dead really matters, that it enables us to picture what another world, another body and another kind of freedom might feel like.

Resurrection though is a real stumbling block to many people. So much so that we've hedged the

celebration of Easter around with a secure wall of bunnies, chicks, eggs and baskets so that if we don't listen too closely to the words of Easter Sunday we can skate right past that thing called resurrection. For most people a kind of cruise through the Easter experience is just fine. Sit back and relax, enjoy the ride, not too deep, not too meaningful, but definitely predictable. We don't know how to find the meaning. We settle for bunnies and talk about crocuses and 'new life.'

But this is the true story of a woman named Mary, who went to the tomb of her friend and teacher named Jesus. Through her tears she heard the man say 'Mary!'. And with the saying of her name, Good Friday ended and Easter began. When he called out her name, she knew that this was no gardener. When he said 'Mary' she knew that it was Jesus. She turned her tear-filled eyes upwards and looked into his eyes, which surely were filled with joy, and she said in Hebrew 'Teacher!'

He told her that he was ascending to God in heaven and he reminded her that God was his Father and her Father, his God and her God. And he told her to go and tell the others what she knew. And so Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples. 'I have seen the Lord!' This is a story with an ending like no other story ever told. Death does not win in this story like so many we hear today, for Good Friday does indeed give way to Easter.

I wonder how many of you have seen the film Titanic? In a way it's surprising that anyone even wanted to go to see it because we all know the ending. The ship, the Titanic, hits an iceberg and sinks and over 1500 people die in the cold waters of the Atlantic Ocean. It's a Good Friday story, a tale of horror and disaster. In a review James Cameron, the writer and director, was quoted as saying 'Titanic is not just a cautionary tale – a myth, a parable, a metaphor for the ills of humankind. It is also a story of faith, courage, sacrifice and above all else, love.'

So how many of you have seen the film? Now, true confession time, how many of you have seen it more than once? The Titanic phenomena, people in droves seeing the film multiple times, would not have happened if the film really had been a Good Friday story. The reason people watch it time and time again is because it is an Easter story. Oh, there is no changing the ending. The ship sinks and people still die. However, in telling the Titanic story the writer tells the tale of a woman named Rose who is engaged to a man she doesn't love, whose exuberant heart is bound up by the chains of expectations and the pretentious cords of prejudice.

One evening, in the height of her despair she climbs over the railing of the ship and prepares to jump into the icy waters, but into Rose's life at that moment comes her saviour. His name is Jack. He keeps her from jumping, and he opens her mind and her heart to the possibility that her Good Friday existence might have an Easter. He sets her free and fills her heart with love. As the ship heads inexorably towards its doom, Jack delivers Rose from her demons and her destroyers. As the ship does down and we hear the last echoes of the band playing 'Nearer My God to Thee,' Rose must make a decision. Rose can board a lifeboat and spend the rest of her life settling for Good Friday or she could choose to get off and be with Jack.

Together in the icy waters they cling to one another. They know they are going to die and that none of the lifeboats will come back for them. Jack takes her hand 'Don't say your good-byes, Rose. Don't you give up. You are going to get out of this..... promise me you will survive... that you will never give up...no matter what happens...no matter how hopeless....promise me now and never let go of the promise.'

'I promise', replies Rose. They close their eyes. Jack dies but Rose is rescued and as you probably know, she lives a good life, and now as an old woman is telling the story of the Titanic. There remains one last scene in the film and we are left to wonder if it is a dream or if it is heaven.

We are underwater and can see the wreck. We go inside the ship. We hear the waltz playing. Slowly

the rusting wreck comes alive again as we come down the grand staircase to the ballroom. It is beautiful. The crowd turns as we descend the stairs and at the bottom a man stands with his back to us. He turns and it is Jack. Smiling he holds his hand out towards us and we are Rose, a beautiful young woman again. The passengers and crew smile and applaud as Rose and Jack embrace in the utter silence of the abyss.

The film Titanic is an Easter story. Rose is a lost girl, but Jack saves her. Though he dies, he saves her. She promises that she will live a good life no matter what happens. No matter how hopeless life becomes she promises to never let go of Jack and his love. In the end Jack is there for her. In the end they are together forever.

And friends that is the real true story of Easter. Jesus comes and saves us. He touches us with his love and offers us life in abundance; a good life that turns us away from Good Friday and toward Easter. We, in response, put our faith in him and we promise to live and not die. We promise to not let go, knowing that God never lets us go. And in the end we know that we will be together.

There are always Good Friday's and, in a way, we are living in one right now. Easter doesn't mean that we will not be hurt, that life will be easy, that bad things won't happen but because of Easter, because we have a Saviour, we can live our lives not in quiet desperation and anguish, but with the confidence that love will never end, even when we physically die.

Perhaps you've heard the story about Jesus returning to heaven after being on earth. The angel Gabriel said 'Where have you been? I've missed you.'

'I've been on earth ministering to people.'

'You must have had a successful ministry. You must have changed the world.'

'They put me to death.'

'That's terrible! But surely you must have had many followers.'

'Only 12 and they deserted me.'

'So your work was a failure'

'I'm not sure. I left it in their hands.'



Sisters and brothers, as Christians we are witnesses to the resurrection, even today! Our lives must tell the story of the good news that came on Easter morning. That's something we do not need our church buildings for. Jesus has left that work in our hands, but he has not left us alone. He has given us many things; He has given us each other; He has given us the story, the gospel and all its wonderful promises and He has given us His Holy Spirit to fill us and guide us and comfort us and remind us.

Let us take up the challenge and become Easter people today! Let us stand firm in the face of the world's Good Fridays and proclaim that the cross is not victorious, that the tomb never wins. Let us rejoice in the simple, yet life-changing Easter proclamation: He's risen! He is risen indeed! Amen