

Easter Day Sermon

Matthew 28.1-11

The earth shook. An angel shining like lightening rolled the stone away. The guards shook and became like dead men. This was groundbreaking stuff. Creating Fear and Joy.

On that first easter day Matthew records how:

the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them. 'Greetings,' he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshipped him. Then Jesus said to them, 'Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.'

Fear and Joy. An interesting mixture.

The Artemis Moon rocket blasted off yesterday. The launch is one of the most dangerous parts of the mission - everything has to go perfectly.

All of the astronauts say they sat down with their families to talk about the risks involved.

Victor Glover, the Mission pilot, said

"We've all got someone, an astronaut, that is going to be with our family members when they're watching launch, which can be this terrific and terrifying moment all at the same time."

Terrific and terrifying all at the same time. That sums up Easter nicely. Think about it. If Christ is risen and the grave is defeated, the predictability of life, the cycle of birth life and death is broken. Suddenly hope, hope that God is there and love wins over the forces of evil, sin and death, is a possibility. Terrific and terrifying.

We are only here because the Messiah who was crucified on Friday did not stay dead. We worship a crucified Messiah who is also the Risen Lord.

Crucified on a political charge, the King of the Jews, crucified by the Empire and their assertion that might is right, the strong win, the strong set the rules _ 'that's life', so we are told and so most people believe. But what if it isn't? What if resurrection just blows a hole through that predictability like a rocket reaching for the heavens.

This rocket, the first for a long time that wasn't aimed at the earth and death and destruction, but aimed at the heavens, is an Easter symbol for us.

From despair to hope. From death to life. From the cross to the grave. No matter what you are going through, no matter how pointless or low you may feel, no matter what is making you anxious and fearful, look up to the heavens, look to the cross of Christ and an empty tomb and put your hope in the God of resurrection.

No wonder that Victor Glover, when allowed to take a personal item with him on the rocket chose to take his bible¹. This stuff is more combustible and explosive than any rocket fuel.

Do you believe it? Because it changes everything...

Last year the Quiet Revival report came out from the Bible Society suggesting that there was a warming towards the Christian faith in this secular, materialistic and sceptical nation, especially amongst Generation Z, the twenty to thirty year olds.

Secularists are cock-a-hoop at the news that the “Quiet Revival” in British Christianity may just be a thing of nought. Last Thursday, YouGov announced that controls to filter out fraudulent responses had not been properly put in place. Thus, the results, which have driven a debate about a national return to faith, could not be trusted.

Andrew Copson, Chief Executive of Humanists UK, was swift to chide: “This is both validation and vindication. We need to be absolutely clear: there is no revival of Christianity in Britain.”

When the Quiet Revival was first published, Rt Rev Graham Tomlin’s former Bishop of Kensington said:

“I’ve never taken the predictions of the Church’s demise too seriously. Which is why I’m not one for putting out the bunting when the predictions go the other way. Christianity’s claims to truth are not dependent on a referendum. Our faith remains true whether or not people believe it. The appeal of Christian faith is precisely the fact that it centres on an event where the eternal became temporal, where God entered into human history. It therefore transcends time and space, opinion polls and surveys. It gives a confidence rooted not in the swinging mood of public opinion, up one minute and down the next, but something lasting, permanent and reliable.”

Despite the unreliable research from You Guv most church leaders I speak to believe it remains plausible that we are at the beginnings of a genuine move of God. In that sense, not everything the Quiet Revival report affirmed was necessarily incorrect (and more research is already being planned). *Something is happening.*

What won’t die are the incredible, genuine stories of God at work.

Last year as part of my sabbatical I went to visit Pastor Mick Fleming in my home town of Burnley. Pastor Mick Fleming runs a church that took over the old United Reformed Church where I grew up in the centre of the town) It is a church unlike many others. The

addict and former gangster turned pastor is building a church for those on the margins, alcoholics, drug addicts, homeless people, sex workers, you name it his church (the church I grew up in) is full of them.

I read an article in Christianity magazine the other day by AJ Gomez of his visit to Mick last monthⁱⁱ. God has continued to do some amazing work through Mick.

There was even one story about a man named Mark who was apparently raised from the dead.

“We were out one day and he overdosed. Just hit the floor,” Mick said. “Paramedics arrived quickly and began working to resuscitate him. “They tried everything, Injections. The [defibrillator]. CPR.”

Eventually, one of the paramedics noticed Mick’s clerical collar. “The paramedic said: ‘Pastor, there’s no more we can do. He’s gone. If you want to say a few words...’”

By the point the paramedics had stepped away to retrieve a body bag, a crowd had amassed. “I told everyone: ‘If you believe in God, pray. If you don’t believe in God, just wish him well,’” Then, Mick placed his hand on Mark and prayed. “I just said: ‘Lord, just give him one last chance to know you.’

“And honestly,” he says, “he went *coughs* and sat up.”

According to Mick’s re-enactment, the paramedic who returned moments later struggled to comprehend what he was seeing. “He said: ‘That’s f***** witchcraft! He was dead!’”

Mick replied: “That’s not witchcraft, man. That’s Jesus Christ.”

The reporter writes: When I meet Mark, he confirms the story: “I was gone. It was over,” he says matter-of-factly. “But when he prayed for me, that was the first time in my life I knew someone cared.” Mark has been clean for over a year now. He attends Church on the Street and helps others reach the rehab that eventually saw him through recovery.

“We see a lot of things we can only explain through Christ,” says Mick. “Our theology isn’t me standing over you praying. It’s me and you sitting down together praying. That’s where Christ is, in that gap between us.”

That vision comes from Mick’s own story. “When I was homeless, I went into a church in Manchester. They were really nice people, but I knew they wanted rid of me.” Outside, he says, the freezing, December cold quickly became dangerous.

“I was an alcoholic and drug addict, and I could feel a fit coming. There was a guy sat in a shop doorway, and he waved me over...he said: ‘Where are you sleeping?’ I said: ‘I don’t know.’ The man proceeded to share what little he had.

“He took his hat off and put it on my head. He got his quilt and wrapped it around me...he poured cider into my mouth till the shakes went, he rolled a cigarette, put it in my mouth and said: ‘You’ll be alright.’”

Mick says that night planted the seed that sprouted into the ministry he stewards today. “I knew I met Jesus in that shop doorway because I couldn’t find him in the church. When I’ve looked back over the years, it’s what’s led me to set up Church on the Street.”

“The reason I go to the poor is because they let me know who the real poor are – me. I can see my own lack of tolerance. I get resentful. They show me my own sin. I need them more than they need me.”

Nine months ago, Mick left his rented home in exchange for a modest second-hand motorhome. Above the driver’s seat hangs a framed board bearing the words of [Joshua 24:15](#): “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” A fitting choice, considering Mick’s rationale for this “church on wheels” is that it enables him to disciple people across the region.

Mobility also provides a measure of protection. As Mick explained, the economics of addiction make his work unwelcome in certain circles. “The average drug dealer will make about £1,000 a week from a user dependent on crack cocaine,” he says. “If we take five people off the streets and detox them, that’s £5,000 out of their pocket.” Threats against his life have come with that territory. Moving between “base camps”, as he described them, ultimately means he can stay safe.

“Travelling light is my theology, it’s not just figurative. They’re God’s burdens to carry, not mine. And I am not equipped to do God’s job for him. I don’t want to, either.”

God’s job.... God’s job is to redeem this fallen world and make it right. Resurrection is a vital element in that. What is dead and buried can new life come? When there is despair, can there be new hope. When there is fear and anxiety can there be joy?

But we are still in a struggle. Pastor Mick faces opposition from the forces of evil and oppression in this world. Resurrection happens in this fallen dark world.

Whilst preparing for the Maundy Thursday service at Rodborough I came across some powerful sculptures depicting the sleeping disciples and the agony of Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane. They are found in the grounds of Gethsemani Abbey in Kentucky United States. They are dedicated to the memory of Jonathon Daniels. Daniels was training to be an Episcopalian priest in the United States.

On August 14, 1965, Daniels was one of a group of 29 protesters, who went to [Fort Deposit, Alabama](#), at the height of the Civil Rights moment led by Revd Martin Luther King to picket its whites-only stores. All of the protesters were arrested. They were transported in a garbage truck to a jail in the nearby town of [Hayneville](#). The police held them for six days in a facility which lacked air conditioning.

Finally, on August 20, the prisoners were released without transport back to Fort Deposit. After release, the group waited near the courthouse jail while one of their members called for transport. Daniels and three others—a white [Catholic](#) priest and two black female activists—walked to buy a cold soft drink at nearby Varner's Cash Store, one of the few local places to serve non-whites. But barring the front was Tom L. Coleman, an unpaid special deputy who was holding a shotgun and had a pistol in a holster.

Coleman threatened the group and levelled his gun at seventeen-year-old [Ruby Sales](#). In Sales's account, Tom Coleman, a deputy sheriff for the county, stood in the doorway as they approached and said, "The store is closed. If you don't get off this goddamn property, I'm going to blow your damn brains out." As Coleman raised his shotgun to fire, Daniels pulled Sales behind him. Shot in the stomach, he died at the scene.

Father Richard F. Morrisroe grabbed activist Joyce Bailey and ran with her. Coleman shot Morrisroe, severely wounding him in the lower back, and then stopped firing.^[6]

Upon learning of Daniels' murder, [Martin Luther King Jr.](#) stated that "one of the most heroic Christian deeds of which I have heard in my entire ministry was performed by Jonathan Daniels."^[7]

A grand jury indicted Coleman for [manslaughter](#). [Richmond Flowers Sr.](#), the Attorney General of Alabama, believed the charge should have been [murder](#) and intervened in the prosecution, but was thwarted by the trial judge T. Werth Thagard. He refused to wait until Morrisroe had recovered enough to testify and removed Flowers from the case. Coleman claimed self-defence, although Morrisroe and the others were unarmed, and was acquitted of manslaughter charges by an [all-white all male jury](#). [Disfranchisement](#) had resulted in excluding blacks from jury duty, as only voters were called. Flowers described the verdict as representing the "democratic process going down the drain of irrationality, bigotry and improper law enforcement."

Coleman continued working as an engineer for the state highway department. He died at the age of 86 on June 13, 1997, without having faced further prosecution. In an interview before his death he said he would shoot them again if he had the chance.

The murder of an educated, white seminarian who was defending an unarmed teenage girl shocked members of the Episcopal Church, historically connected to the enslavers of America, and other whites into facing the violent reality of racial inequality in the South. Other members worked to continue the civil rights movement and work for social justice. It set off a wave of indignation and quickly spawned litigation and congressional action. Soon the courts of the South were required to seat juries representative of the population by gender and race.

After testifying at the murder trial, Ruby Sales went on to college, then to graduate studies at Princeton and to divinity school in Massachusetts. She would become a professor at the University of Maryland and Spelman College, and a legendary activist for civil rights for Black Americans, women, and gay and lesbian people. She founded an inner-city mission dedicated to Daniels.

Like the death of Jesus, for us, came our salvation and the hope of eternal life and reconciliation with God and each other. That's why we call the crucifixion day Good Friday.

Good came out of this evil.

Good came out of the evil of the shooting death of Jonathon Daniels.

Last year In August—60 years after Daniels's death and Coleman's acquittal—several hundred people gathered in front of the Lowndes County Courthouse in Hayneville for the 29th annual Jonathan Daniels and the Martyrs of Alabama Pilgrimage. The started with a prayer: "O God of justice and compassion, you put down the proud and mighty from their place, and lift up the poor and the afflicted: We give you thanks for your faithful witness Jonathan Myrick Daniels . . . we pray that we, following his example, may make no peace with oppression."

The crowd, then walked to the jail in which Daniels, Sales, Morrisroe, and others had been held before the shooting. From there, it was just a few steps to the site of the grocery store where Daniels was shot. People wove their way out of the crowd to kneel and touch their hands and faces to the ground near the building.

Bishop Michael Curry (who reached at Prince Harry and Megan's wedding) preached, encouraging the crowd not to remember Daniels "as a fond memory, but to reconstitute within our soul a commitment to [that for] which he gave his life." Adrian Johnson, the district judge of the Alabama circuit court that serves Lowndes County, welcomed the crowd to the courthouse, admitting that it was "the site of many injustices." His bench served as the communion altar.ⁱⁱⁱ

Resurrection is not a fond memory. Don't come here to celebrate Easter as something cute and nice, bunnies and chocolates and bright yellow flowers but in the past. Just a memory.

In a world that continues to discriminate, that preaches division and hierarchy between people and nature, men and women, straight and queer, White and not White, Christian and not Christian, English and not English, we come to be resurrection people.

Followers of Christ who seek to bring good out of evil, to redeem the world, to make all things new.

Christian nationalism wants to make Britain a Christian country again; to make Jesus Lord. But it is a thin veil for racism. I too would like to see Jesus Lord of all, the Jesus of the gospels that is, the Jesus who said love your neighbour as yourself, love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you, show kindness to the stranger, forgive and you will be forgiven, give to the needy, and do not judge... I long for Britain to be a country full of people who will follow the Risen Lord Jesus in his way. Do you? If so what are you doing about it?

Will you witness to the risen Lord by living the Jesus way, by seeking to bring good where there is evil, to bring redemption where there has been wrong. This is the ongoing act of Resurrection. Don't just celebrate it and remember it. Live it.

Many find themselves in Holy Saturday. That day of utter devastation. Not only had the disciples witnessed an horrific violent death of their friend and leader but also of their hopes for a different future, a different world.

Many of you may be in that time of fragmented faith – a faith that has too many holes punctured in it by circumstances, hard blows of life. Too much damage ever to return to a simplistic certainty.

Please don't give up on the hope of resurrection even if all you can sense is the bleakness of God's apparent absence and silence. Easter faith was born in the darkness and sometimes we have to wait in the shadows until eventually a glimmer of light appears on the horizon.

We live through terrifying times. But we have terrific news of hope, of resurrection faith.

Terrifying and terrific. Fear and Joy. From despair to hope. From death to life. From the cross to the grave. No matter what you are going through, no matter how pointless or low you may feel, no matter what is making you anxious and fearful, look up to the heavens, look to the cross of Christ and an empty tomb and put your hope in the God of resurrection.

Jesus greeted those terrified yet joyful women on that first easter day and said 'Do not be afraid.

Do not be afraid.

Go and tell. Go and pray, go and work, go and witness, go and live resurrection'. And I will be with you always to the end of the age.

Alleluia, Christ is Risen. He is Risen indeed. Alleluia!

ⁱ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c0q4w3l0wdvo>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.premierchristianity.com/interviews/overdoses-and-tea-my-24-hours-with-the-radical-pastor-caring-for-britains-forgotten-streets/21209.article>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.christiancentury.org/features/formed-solidarity>