

Rev'd John Shoaf — Sermon — 9 April 2023 — Easter Sunday
Acts 10:34-43
Colossians 3:1-4
John 20:1-18

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

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Christ is risen, on the third day, as he told us. Many times he prophesied to the disciples and to the crowds that he would rise. Once he likened his body to a temple, which he could tear down and build up again in three days. Once he told them quite plainly that he would be tried and killed and rise again. Once he rebuked Peter for not believing, telling him, “Get thee behind me, Satan!”

Christ is risen on Easter morning, and? Now what?

I rose, too, on Easter morning. So did all of you. And it was a bit easier since Daylight Savings has ended! If you're like me, it takes a few weeks to get used to the change, and so I had a bit of extra time on my hands this morning.

Time. We live in time. We live from hour to hour, day to day, year to year. Time is a gift from God. Time in which to grow up, time in which to make plans and to try to achieve them, time in which to live and to follow all those patterns we develop, in school and work and relationships and loves and cares and dreams and deaths.

And Christ rose on Easter morning.

He rose — and what did he do then?

Well, of course on Easter Sunday, we talk about the rising itself, which was certainly a miracle. He was dead, and then he rose to life. He really was dead. You don't survive a crucifixion. You die of loss of blood and slow asphyxiation. It's a terrible death. Jesus didn't survive it; he came back after it. God brought him back to life. He walked and talked and was seen by many people, some of whose stories are told in the Bible.

But that happened two thousand years ago. The shock and the horror and the disbelief was buried long ago with the ones who saw it happen: people like his mother, Mary, and Mary Magdalene, and the other Mary, the wife of Clopas. Gosh, there were a lot of Marys back then! And the centurions at the foot of the cross, and the disciples who looked on from afar. That death, that event in time, is gone and done with.

What matters is that Christ, having once been brought back to life, having been raised from the grave by his Father, didn't die again. The death on the cross

was it for him. That's all the death Jesus will ever see, in himself. It was a death for all time.

And so ... Jesus is alive. Now, and here. Here, and now. He lives today, from this moment to the next. Not just in our hearts, although Jesus lives in our hearts. He lives. We may not understand just how, but it doesn't matter. It is part of the mystery of God's world that his Son lives.

And because he lives, we have life. We are sustained from moment to moment by God's continuing life through Jesus Christ.

He is risen indeed, and all the world rises up with him. Jesus Christ, in conquering death, opens up the door of heaven and invites us all in. His sacrifice for us brings us into the full grace of God, where we may live in eternal and boundless love. His defeat of death shows us that there is nothing we cannot overcome, neither trials nor troubles nor tribulations which we cannot come through, through him who strengthens us. This is the glorious gift which God prepared for us before the ages began, and for which God sent his only Son. He lived among us as a man and brought us with him to God.

Today is a day for hyperbole, for rejoicing and celebration. But do not let the familiarity of the words we use lessen the real truth of what God has done for us. It should never be simply rote or unthinking habit which makes us shout "He is risen indeed!!" The truth is so much more amazing, so much more glorious, than our words will ever express.

In this past week I've seen the traditional build-up to Easter, a week which is the culmination of our Lenten journey. I've talked a lot about the "journey", as such, during the past several weeks. It's something that lots of ministers do talk about at this time of year. We speak of journeying with Jesus to the cross. We encourage our congregations to make the walk with Jesus, through readings and through prayer. But in the last few days I've come to wonder what it really means for us to journey with Jesus to the cross.

There is so much that is familiar about this journey. Although Jesus warns his disciples several times that he will be arrested, and will be tried, and executed (and of course the disciples don't really understand), until Jesus gets to Jerusalem and Judas leads the soldiers to him, it seems almost business as usual. Aside from those few warnings, Jesus goes about his Father's business of teaching, healing, performing a few miracles. They walk a lot during the day, and they find a place to stay for the night. They go to Jerusalem, and back to Galilee, and some other places. Everywhere they go, Jesus touches somebody, and gains some disciples. The twelve might be forgiven for thinking that this is how it will always be. Do they wonder, as they approach the end of nearly three years of wandering, if this is all there is?

And for us: all through Lent we continued to have our Sunday services, and our midweek services on Wednesdays, until we reached Holy Week. Then the pace accelerated a bit. We shared communion every morning, Monday through Thursday this week. It was a simple service; we heard a lesson, we heard a homily, we took the bread and the wine.

Then we had a few special services: Thursday night here/at Prebbleton we had the Maundy Thursday service, with foot-washing, which is based on Jesus's own actions to his disciples, related in John 13. It is a symbolic action of great value, showing us how we must be servants to each other, even the highest among us. But apart from that, we had our readings and our prayers and our bread and wine, much like any other service.

On Friday we gathered here and at St Mary's/Prebbleton to hear the story of Jesus on trial for his life, and then crucified. This service was certainly different — no communion wine or bread, no dismissal, only the bare fact of Jesus on the cross.

Lying in bed that night, I thought about all the services, and this idea of journeying with Christ to the cross. Did we in fact, through all these services, through all these special commemorations of the events from two thousand years ago, walk with Jesus? Were we there when they crucified our Lord? There I was, lying in bed Friday night, having eaten a good dinner, watched some TV, read for a bit before turning out my light, as I usually do — and having recently come from the foot of the cross. I know some people do more: they may attend a vigil or spend the day in prayer. Those are worthy things to do. But many of us, I think, do not do these things, but simply go on with our lives as usual, outside the special services of the season.

This is not a question of faith. I believe in God and the gift he gave us through his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. I believe Christ died to set us free, and by his grace, God offers to us eternal life. This is our belief as Christians, and faith does not depend on any church services, although they have value in bringing together the faithful, who are the Body of Christ. Yet I feel there is value in this idea of walking with Jesus to the cross. It's not an idea that I want to give up on, because it is necessary to understand his sacrifice in order to know him and to know our place in God's world as God's faithful people.

But what I wonder, and what I want you to think about, is how we do that. Is walking with Christ something we do every year at Easter time? Is it only done then? Is it appropriate to consider the passion, the agony, of our Lord only in Lent?

Truly, if our faith is strong, we walk with Jesus every day of the year. We are always journeying to the cross. It is good to mark the special days, for beginnings are important. We remember birthdays and anniversaries, and of

course Christmas is another important holy day, because of the incarnation, God becoming man. We mark the beginnings of important things, the starting points, where we've come from. But more importantly, we look to the end points. A project is begun — that is good — but to complete a project is what we look towards. Jesus's time on earth was one great work which he did for his Father and for us. Beginning it was good (and miraculous); but Jesus was always focused on the end of his journey. He kept his head turned towards Jerusalem, even as he did the things along the way which he had to do.

This is how we should live our lives: journeying towards the end, and keeping that end in sight. And because of what Jesus did, we have a glorious end in sight, at the conclusion of our journey. It is indeed a journey with Christ, yet not a journey towards a cross. It is a journey towards the loving embrace of God and towards eternal life in God's care. This everlasting life is God's gift to us through the Son; and the gift is freely given us out of God's tremendous love. We should focus on the gift and above all on the giver. Yes, we should remember what Jesus went through for us, how he died, and so we do remember, during Lent and on Good Friday particularly. But the focus of our lives from day to day should be our expectation of eternal life with the living Christ, for that is what we celebrate today — Christ is alive! He has left the tomb empty, for it could not hold him.

To focus on the end of our lives, when we will finally see God's face, does not mean ignoring or devaluing our relationships here on earth. On the contrary, living in God's love and looking towards the next life enhances the love we feel for our husband or wife or partner or siblings or parents or friends. All love is based in God, and when we recognise that, we are free to love ever more deeply and truly than we ever could otherwise. The knowledge that we shall know our Saviour when this life's journey is over brings a calm and an enhancement of life's pleasures, as well as a comfort in life's trials.

To journey towards our life's end as Jesus journeyed toward the cross should be our goal at all times of the year, whether it's a working day or a holiday. After all, Jesus's journey did not end at the cross — it ended at the empty tomb, and he lives today.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

Amen.