

**Easter Sunday A March 23, 2008: St Aidan's & Wesley 10.30am Revd Peter Walker
Jeremiah 31. 1-6, Acts 10. 34-43 & John 20. 1-18**

I found an endearing article in the Sydney Morning Herald late last year. It relates to the enthusiasm of a certain Catholic priest, and I hope you might enjoy it, as I did. Under the heading "Bell tolls for priest" it reads:

A Catholic priest in the Netherlands has been fined \$8,550 for ringing his church bells too loudly in the morning. The priest began ringing the bells, at just after 7am, soon after arriving in Tilburg about six months ago, prompting dozens of complaints from residents. A spokesman for the town's council said, "The priest can ring his bells whenever he likes but he has to keep within noise regulations. People don't appreciate it". "We are still trying to find ways to make him stop!", the spokesman said. The priest risks further fines if he continues.

In my mind's eye I picture, rightly or wrongly, a portly, cheerful man in a priestly garb so wound up in the joy of his faith that he is unable to restrain the desire to let it ring out. He might as well be the symbol for this day of Easter celebration.

There is something about this forever reaching God that is determined to draw us into God's loving embrace. And today we celebrate - we ring our bells - because that desire to reach us is now shown to be more powerful even than death itself. More powerful than was the death of suffering and crucifixion that was inflicted upon Jesus of Nazareth; more powerful than the death that awaits us.

Like most people, we are afraid of death, if not overtly, then perhaps as a kind of background fear. And that which was in the background occasionally comes to the surface, as it did for the friends of Jesus after his death.

In today's Gospel we are told that all the disciples felt fear. Mary was in the "dark" when she went to the tomb. She then had an exceptional experience, at the tomb, whereby the living presence of the thought-to-be-dead Jesus was with her, and she clings to it - clinging, perhaps, out of fear. Then, that night, in the dark, the disciples are locked away, hidden behind closed doors, because they are filled with fear. The same authorities who had killed Jesus may now be after them, and so the doors of that upper room are shut. ~~~

There is wisdom in knowing when to shut a door behind you; closing the door on a part of life that needs to be left behind. Probably in growing up we learn it; and then in mature life we enact it. We learn in life when to take a risk and when to cut our losses. The disciples had, here, probably got it about right. Pilate had shut the door on the 'king of the Jews', once and for all. And that is what the disciples had done too, understandably. They were adjusting to the facts. It was over. It was good while it lasted. Close the door.

We all know that sometimes the closing of a door is healing, a leaving behind that brings release. But, so often, it is a wilderness of pain. Those of you who have gone through grief recently know it. Closing the door, perhaps literally the door to someone's room, is a pain like no other; and fear as well. ~~~

There is a witness in the Gospels about the resurrection appearances of Jesus which especially struck me this year. We often misunderstand it (by not reading it closely enough) and, in so doing, miss out on the message. The risen Christ comes through closed doors.

When it was evening on that day...and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked..., Jesus came among them and said "Peace be with you". (John 20. 19)

After his death, Jesus was experienced by the disciples as a living presence, even within closed doors; doors they had closed, on him, behind them. The dark tomb could not hold him, nor could the darkness of the despair of his, at that moment, hope-less followers. Mental gymnastics about how a body can pass through wood is not what is needed here. A close reading of the text will show there isn't any mention of Jesus doing anything of that kind. The closed door is important - but not so we may ponder the supernatural feat of a body passing through it. Rather, so we will recognise that here is an Easter story that preaches there is nothing that we have done that can prevent God's love meeting us afresh through the spirit of the risen Lord. Even the doors we have closed upon him, even the doors of death hold no power, nor need they provoke any fear. Easter is as much about fear and closed doors as it is about appearances and open tombs.

The resurrection doesn't simply mean 'here is eternal life'. It doesn't simply mean that we hope to see our loved ones when we die. It means that the very first thing Jesus does is break through to those who are fearful; to those who have disappointed and forsaken him; he come among them to reassure and to bring peace; "Peace be with you". ~~~

We gather today, just as those first disciples gathered, behind closed doors. A bit cowardly - if truth be told - of what we believe. Or maybe we are hear because we fear not coming, not worshipping, and not believing. What happens to us then? Should we shut the door behind us on the business of believing in God through Jesus Christ?

That is what the disciples did. And who can blame them. Anyone would do the same. But they were transformed. Peter's magnificent sermon from Acts 10 is testimony without peer to their message and their courage.

We are witnesses to all that he did...(he says) They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear... He commanded us to preach to the people... that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. (10. 39-42)

I have always found the transformation of those disciples, filled as they were with dread and panic and foreboding about their future, the most compelling evidence that something happened that Easter day. The Risen Christ came through their locked doors.

Their faith, and our faith, is based on this Easter miracle. Your relationship to God, thanks be to God, is not based on what you feel or believe, or think. It is based on what God has done for you. It is God's initiative, and not yours. The Spirit of the risen Christ can move through whatever closed door you are locked behind.

There is a sign on the wall in our minister's vestry. I read it most Sunday mornings. It is there because it contains a favourite saying of David Bardwell, and it is, of course, the Bardwell vestry. The sign says:

The secret to life is not your responsibility - it is your response to God's ability.

Easter will show you God's ability, to reassure and bring peace, if you will let it. ~~~

The last word should go to the prophet Jeremiah, whose words were written some 600 years before these Easter events and yet seem so becoming:

Thus says the LORD: The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness; ...there will be a day when the sentinels will call... 'Come, let us go up to Zion, to the LORD our God.'

Ring the bells.