

Easter Sunday – 8th April 2012 – St Aidan’s and Wesley

Theme: Expect the unexpected.

“You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him.” Mark 16: 6

Introduction

Some years ago, one of our Patrol Ministers in Frontier Services told me a beautiful story. He had got to know a mob of people that camped by a creek in central Queensland and it was a gorgeous spot. He had accidentally come upon them one Easter when out visiting in that section of his patrol. He began to set-up camp some distance from them when a couple wandered over and invited him to join them, which he did. That night around the campfire he shared a little of himself with them. As it was Easter Saturday, one of them invited him to conduct an Easter Sunday service. Not an everyday occurrence in the bush but one he readily agreed to. All attended the next morning and it was held under a gum tree by the creek. This gathering has become an institution which is now about ten years old. The other year, one of the couples contacted the Patrol Minister just after Christmas to see if they could arrange a marriage for the upcoming Easter without the knowledge of their friends. All was as usual so their friends thought. They met for the relatively brief Easter Sunday Service under the gum tree by the billabong. However, the service was a little different. A wedding took place which astounded their friends. They had turned up for their traditional Aussie Easter service only to see two of their friends become married. Expect the unexpected at Easter!

The empty tomb

Certainly this is the case as we enter into the Gospel set for today.

The three women wander to the tomb with the spices to anoint Jesus’ body wondering how to roll the stone away from the doorway of the cave that formed the gravesite. They find the stone rolled away from the entrance and encounter an ‘angel figure’ who tells them very clearly that ‘Jesus the Nazarene they were seeking, the one who was crucified, has risen. He is not here. See the place where they laid him’

Suddenly their world is turned upside down. Their own minds struggle to comprehend the enormity of what is being said to them. Hence we read in Mark 16:8 “Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid”.

Quite a different take on the resurrection compared to the other Gospels.

In looking at this passage and sourcing other people’s thoughts I came across Marcus J. Borg’s reflections in a small, recent book called ‘Conversations with Scripture: The Gospel of Mark’. (pages 107/8)

Borg in his wonderful way makes the following comments.

Mark’s story of Easter surprises us for more than one reason:

- its brevity – only eight verses long, compared to Matthew’s twenty verses, Luke’s fifty-three verses and the two

chapters in John 20/21.

- its ending, which is also the ending of his gospel. As already mentioned the women flee the tomb and say nothing. This is puzzling and it is not surprising that longer endings were added to Mark over the next century.
- the lack of appearance stories. Mark has no stories of the Risen Jesus appearing to the disciples in the original Manuscript. There is the promise of appearances to the women but none recorded in the original text that ends at verse 8.....

But in spite of its brevity and its lack of appearance stories, Mark's Easter story is remarkably complete and filled with meaning. The women go to the tomb, expecting to find Jesus in the land of the dead – but the tomb is empty. The resurrection is proclaimed to the women: "You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here." Note that the proclamation of the resurrection includes mention of his crucifixion. Though he was executed by the authorities, you won't find him in the tomb – he has been raised by God. Even the sealed tomb with a huge stone rolled in front of it could not contain Jesus. As Luke 24:5 puts it in his story of the empty tomb, "Why do you look for the living among the dead?"

Borg goes on to ask the question: "What does the story of the empty tomb mean?" Borg answers this as follows:

For early Christians generally, Easter had two primary meanings.

Jesus lives – he is a figure of the present, not simply the past.

And Jesus is Lord – one with God, raised to God's right hand, vindicated by God as both Lord and Christ and thus vindicated against the powers that put him to death. All of these are present, explicitly or implicitly, in Mark's story of the empty tomb. And so Mark's story ends. It is as Mark says in the title of his gospel, the good news of Jesus the Messiah and the Son of God. The women are told to go back to Galilee, to the beginning of the story – there you will see him.

An intriguing end to the story that began with Mark 1:9 saying, "At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan".

We are left to ponder the resurrection!

Conclusion

What I love about Easter is that we are called to expect the unexpected as we travel along our faith journeying. We may like the answers to be given to us clearly and compellingly so that faith and belief is easy. However, that is not what Mark's account of the empty tomb reveals.

"Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid." Mark 16:8

Let us pray

Risen Christ, hear the prayer of my heart, not the dull confusion of my mind. Hear the tears I will not shed, the grief I hide in busyness, and bring your resurrection love weaving new life.

Risen Christ, hear the prayer of my heart not the words of foolish boasting. Hear the doubts within my soul, dark denials freezing action, and shine your resurrection light revealing new life.

Risen Christ, hear the prayer of my heart not the fear I hide behind. Hear the longing for a fairer world, for God's justice and compassion, and bring your resurrection power enabling new possibilities, new expectations and new life. Amen

(from a prayer by Chris Polhill – 'Bread & Fire')