

WITNESSES FOR THE RISEN CHRIST! EASTER DAY A

City UCA 27.3.16

Isaiah 65, 17-25; Psalm 118, 1-2, 14-24; Acts 10,34-43; John 20,1-18

Prayer: Lord God, today we praise you for your gift of new life made possible in the death and resurrection of Jesus. May we be open to your word, and willing to witness to your truth. And may words as spoken and as heard convey the Gospel with integrity and love. Amen.

Reality Television has been around for some years now. It is supposed to present life as it is really lived – no scripting, no leading or directing – just showing human interactions as they flow. So we have had “Survival, Lost, Big Brother, and House Rules”, just to name a few. Most recently, avid Reality Television fans have had a field day with “I’m a Celebrity, get me out of here”. This show was heavily promoted by network 10 and was screened 5 nights per week for its duration! Now it is interesting that rating surveys of Reality Television shows invariably peak early but then subside. Some shows have even been cut before going their full term.

Some people may ask: “how can 50 minutes of television, minutely managed to fit strict timing schedules, with a cast of celebrities selected for their personality and or appearance and coached to make the most of their presence in the program – genuinely be regarded as real life? Well, the audio visual records may be real, but the lifestyles promoted often involve

rampant egos intent on winning at all costs, or examples of novel ways to break the law!

Is this real life? Where individual self-interest rules supreme? And communities are built on compromise?

I sense that Easter offers a unique perspective on life as real and authentic. Even the Sydney Morning Herald editorial for Good Friday offered a rather mild justification for Easter as a life changing event. In conclusion it stated "Easter is a story that can remind each of us that we are less limited by our resources and less confined by our circumstances than we are by our own approach to change. It is a message of the possibility of liberation from the dead hand of routines and situations that work against our best interests or deny our full potential. It tells us that there are possibilities available to each of us if only we have the imagination to identify them and the willingness to embrace them". Is that all? Easter as a resource for human self-improvement? Release from routines? Possibilities imagined and embraced?

What on earth does that mean in the context of global terror attacks, raging conflicts, streams of displaced persons and indifference to the health of our planet? Does Easter offer nothing more than the stimulus to choose a positive mindset that might somehow help us fulfil our own best interest?

It seems to me that the unique message of Easter is not something that soothes us or massages our self-esteem. It is nothing short of confronting us with God's eternal YES to our messed up world. Today, we gather here to proclaim that that Easter begins with God, not us. And we proclaim that

creation can be redeemed because of what God has done in raising Jesus Christ from the dead. The life that he lived, seemingly destroyed by human self-interest and sin, burst forth again as a sign of God's power and grace. Living the Christian life does not begin with us and our puny perspectives and heroic efforts. It begins with the reality of God, summoning us to trust that authentic life is present as the risen Christ is present. And through the Holy Spirit, Christ redeems the earth both through and beyond the community that bears his name.

So the story of Easter is an uncontained mystery, conveyed across the ages in sacred text, liturgy, music, poetry, drama and preaching. It is not the product of imaginative human scripting. Its message comes to us as a gracious witness which started with a handful of Jesus' followers and constantly finds expression in new ways as one generation makes way for the next.

Today we have heard a version of the Easter story as recorded in the 4th Gospel. It is important to hear this because John offers us a different perspective from those of the other Gospels. In the first 2 verses, the narrator reintroduces the 3 characters whose responses dominate John's version of the story.

Mary Magdalene finds a tomb with its stone rolled away. When she runs to tell the others that the body has disappeared, Peter and the beloved disciple take off to see for themselves before Mary returns to make her own discoveries.

For the beloved disciple, his response is one of belief. As soon as he hears Mary's news, he jumps up to see what has happened and arrives at the

tomb before Peter. His actions are understandable because in the 4th Gospel he always seems to represent the most appropriate way to respond to Jesus and his message. He stayed with Jesus to the end, and of course he would want to see what was happening now. Because the beloved disciple serves as the faithful witness, the source of the knowledge for belief in this Gospel, he must see for himself the linen cloths and empty tomb. And he instantly believes without full comprehension or explanation of what it all means.

We all know people like this. Every church needs them. These are the people who see service possibilities in faded fellowship halls and underused community spaces. They are the ones who see signs of hope in an ageing congregation that the world writes off. These are the people who require no proof that eternal life trumps death and smile inwardly every time they hear the word “resurrection”. These are the people whose boundless optimism may annoy us and they often refuse to face facts as we see them ... and yet, we secretly cheer for them and draw strength for our own faith journeys from their unwavering trust that God will work some good, even out of a crucifixion.

Then we have Peter’s response.

Peter’s reaction to Mary’s news about an open tomb is less easy to understand in this Gospel. Why must he join in an outlandish footrace to Jesus’ tomb? After all, he has spent the last few days running away from Jesus – why run toward him now? John does not speculate, but there are some possibilities. Maybe he was simply jealous of the beloved disciple, and wanted to prove that he was as good and faithful as him. Or perhaps he was motivated by guilt. He runs out the door so that he can say he was

sorry for denying Jesus after boasting about his loyalty. And yet he was not present at the cross. Or maybe Peter felt a hopeful curiosity – with all of the other disciples, he was present at the raising of Lazarus. Could it be possible that the same thing has happened to Jesus?

Many of us live with Peter in this complex of emotions. We harbour petty jealousies for those who seem so blessed by the love of God, so full of confidence and joy. We are resentful of the success of others. Or we promise ourselves that we will not fall away from whatever God has given us to do, but the minute we are threatened in some way, we leave.

With Peter we are hurrying to confess our shortcomings. Or maybe we remember something remarkable and life giving from our past, running to see if it might happen again, if new life is possible even for those of us caught in a web of conflicting feelings and actions.

And now to Mary's response.

Mary shows up at the tomb after her male companions have returned home.

She expects nothing to happen. She has come to mourn the loss of life and to bid goodbye. In her grief she can't think clearly. She sees 2 angels and does not recognise their other worldly origins. She sees Jesus and mistakes him for the gardener. Then he speaks he name and she suddenly knows exactly who this mysterious stranger is. She responds to the call of her name; "Teacher" she replies. Then Jesus commissions her to go and tell what she has seen, just as he commissioned the woman at the well way back at the beginning of his ministry.

Scholars often remind us that the resurrection narratives are really commission stories, sending believers out into the world to tell everyone that death is not the last word. Otherwise, no one would ever know what happened, and Easter would be just a reunion story with tears and hugs all round.

But Mary obeys the risen Jesus, fighting her impulse to cling to a familiar body, and leaves the garden to tell what she knows to be true.

An expected ending is a new beginning – of telling the truth about life to those who want to deal only with death. Of offering living water and the bread of life to those who want only to buy and sell commodities that perish. Mary speaks, and in her speaking we find our own voice.

And the Easter story goes on!

Norman Wight tells of an incident in cold war Russia where a communist lecturer was summing up at the end of a presentation. His large audience listened fearfully. “Therefore”, he said “there is no God, Jesus Christ never existed, there is no such thing as the Holy Spirit. The church is an oppressive institution, and anyway it’s out of date. The future belongs to the state, and the state is in the hands the party.”

He was about to sit down when an old priest near the front stood up. “May I say three words?” he asked. The lecturer, disdainfully, gave him permission. He turned, looked out over the crowd, and shouted; “Christ is risen” and back came the roar of the people: “He is risen indeed!” They had been saying it every Easter for a thousand years, why should they stop now?

What is real about life? Is it reflected in the tragic acts of terror that kill and maim and evoke fear and revenge? Or is it found in the example of self-centred celebrities who portray lifestyles which promise so much and deliver so little? Or is it to be found in the resurrected Christ, who by God's grace defeated evil and death and has summoned us to, like him, deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow him, in faith, in hope and in love. Isn't that what makes life real?

And now to God be all praise, majesty, power and dominion, for ever and ever, Amen.