**MSCC Easter Message 16 April 2017**

**Hope through the Resurrection**

How hopeful are you? Not hopeful as in, “I hope it doesn’t rain tomorrow”, but rather, are you naturally optimistic? Perhaps you would call yourself a realist, when in fact you look on the down side of life…that’s called pessimism.

There were once two identical twins. They were alike in every way but one. One was a hope-filled optimist who only ever saw the bright side of life. The other was a dark pessimist, who only ever saw the down side in every situation. The parents were so worried about the extremes of optimism and pessimism in their boys they took them to the Doctor. He suggested a plan. “On their next birthday give the pessimist a shiny new bike, but give the optimist only a pile of manure.” It seemed a fairly extreme thing to do. After all the parents had always treated their boys equally. But in this instance they decided to try to Doctor’s advice. So when the twins birthday came round they gave the pessimist the most expensive, top of the range, racing bike a child has ever owned. When he saw the bike his first words were, “I’ll probably crash and break my leg.”

To the optimist they gave a carefully wrapped box of manure. He opened it, looked puzzled for a moment, then ran outside screaming, “You can’t fool me! Where there’s this much manure, there’s just gotta be a pony around here somewhere!”

Perspective is everything. What we hope for, and who we put our hopes in, can mark us out as optimists or pessimists. And when we look at Easter – the most important day of the Christian calendar - this one, very hopeful act of Jesus rising from the dead, is central to what we believe and why we believe. For the optimist and for the pessimist, the resurrection of Jesus changes everything!

Historians are clear about two things about Jesus – he existed and he died. There would be few people who would doubt these facts. If we can’t be sure that Jesus lived and died, then we can’t be sure of any event in history. These activities are generally the things that mark out our lives! The man who lived 2000 years ago then died is not a “hold the press” news story. The fact that he was a great teacher was not even a major news story. The fact that he hung on a cross was no great feat – the Romans killed a lot of people that way. Jesus probably wasn’t the only persistent person who claimed to be God’s chosen one; or even someone who tried to upset the ruling religious leaders. So what was it that made him unique?

The one thing that marks out Jesus from everyone else is the empty tomb! It gives us hope in all kinds of ways. As Paul writes in 1 Cor 15, Jesus died. Jesus was buried. For him to have achieved these things, we know that he must have lived too – and there are plenty of accounts of his teaching, his miracles and his love for people. But then…we have this astounding fact: he was raised on the third day! Paul reports this is of “first importance”. Quite rightly, Paul remarks this fact, though disputed by some, is the most important thing of our faith. Christ has died, Christ is risen…and Christ will come again! Our Christian faith is built on nothing less than our understanding and conviction that God raised Jesus from the dead. If God is God, and if he is beyond my experience and knowledge and capacity to do whatever he chooses, then there is no reason why God couldn’t do this!

If Jesus is not risen from the dead, then my faith comes tumbling down. If Jesus was not raised to life, then it’s a horrible hoax – we’re singing to a dead man, praying to a dead man, preaching about a dead man, worshipping a dead man. I don’t want to put my trust in a dead man. What hope can we have in something that’s no longer alive? None.

**Read Luke 24:1-12**

On this Resurrection Sunday, I’d like us to spend a few moments looking at three strands of hope that we find in Luke’s account of the resurrection at the tomb: Words of hope – spoken by the men outside the tomb; memories of hope in the minds of the women who had come to anoint Jesus’ body, kindling a reminder of what Jesus had previously told his followers; and the fear of hope – the confusion that Peter experiences when he comes to the tomb and can’t quite get his head around what on earth has occurred over the last few days.

**Words of Hope:**

I was recently at the introductory evening of “What Can a Parent Do?!” Ruth Basden helped us discuss a number of things that prevent parents from communicating effectively both with their children and with their partners. She went on to explain that we often mishear, misinterpret or just miss what people are saying because we are all wired differently. We might be listening out for one thing, but hear something totally different. Or we might presuppose that our husband or wife asks us to do something and then totally forget what they asked the other person to do…often resulting in an argument. Ruth introduced us to the Five Love Languages by Gary Chapman, who explains that the way we communicate is not always clear to others around us because of the way we give and receive the messages. For him, the way we receive and give love is of key importance. Words of affirmation are one such way of giving and receiving love. There are people here who just love receiving positive words spoken to them. Others might really appreciate getting cards or letters which show care or appreciation. Still others will receive love best through a hug or by spending quality time with another person. The last Love Language is by giving and receiving through practical action – showing love by doing something for someone.

For the women at the tomb, they were least expecting such a visitation, let alone such hopeful words from the shining men which came to their ears: “He is not here. He is risen!” Isn’t it so often to doubt the words of another without some form of proof or evidence? Even recently when the doctors told me that my elbow bone had healed itself so there was no need for them to perform extra surgery, I had an element of doubt: perhaps it’s a human thing. Perhaps it’s me being naturally cautious or pessimistic. The docs didn’t bother doing an x-ray because they hadn’t needed to. They seemed hopeful and they gave me hope by their words. For the women at the tomb, their proof was indisputable. Jesus’ body wasn’t there, but the graveclothes were. Angels had appeared to offer what angels do best – give a clear message of encouragement: He is risen! Wow…what hope!

**Memories of Hope**

These words of hope give way to memories of hope: “Remember how he told you…the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, be crucified and on the third day be raised again” (24:6-7). These reminders sparked such joy, such elation, such overwhelming hope! Although they had not yet seen Jesus in this account, they became aware again of Jesus’ promise that he would rise from the dead. In the NIV, the words of verse 8 come across as a fact: “They remembered his words”. The words of Jesus – always good news! This news is good news, it’s great news – Jesus. Alive! Not only for our salvation from sin, but a new hope. A hope that calls us into a relationship with Father God. A hope that speaks of grace and forgiveness, and our own resurrection. A hope of eternal life and a hope of perhaps even being more optimistic about our own life and existence now. A hope which we can offer to others through our lives, our actions and our own message of hope.

Those miracles that we have been hearing about over the last few weeks in Mark’s Gospel were always accompanied by words of hope from Jesus: “Your faith has healed you!” “I tell you, take up your mat and go home!” “Go in peace and be free from your suffering!” These words of hope and a new life for ordinary people are also reminders of hope – memories or encouragements of promises of God’s goodness in our own lives. Even in spite of troubling circumstances, we can remember and be encouraged by words of hope and inspiration. Archbishop Desmond Tutu said this about hope: “Hope is being able to see light despite the darkness.” Rob Bell in his book Velvet Elvis writes, “Why blame the dark for being dark? It is far more helpful to ask why the light isn’t as bright as it should be.” Martin Luther King said, “We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope”.

The Psalms are a source of great encouragement and hope. Even the most well-known, Psalm 23, helps in times of adversity – “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me…” At our Maundy Thursday Communion service, we stopped to listen to Psalm 43 in which the psalmist laments, “Why, God? Why have I been rejected? Why so downcast?” But still he clings on to the hope he has in God: “For I will yet praise him, my saviour and my God.” Psalm 22, often read at Easter time begins with the words Jesus remembered whilst on the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning?” Yet as we read on in the psalm, it becomes apparent that there is still hope and faith and trust that God is still there – (v19): “But you, O Lord, be not far off. O my strength, come quickly to help me.”

The memories of hope; believing and remembering that we have a God who somehow comes through. For the ladies at the empty tomb, the angel reminds them of Jesus’ promise he will return, and they are driven to action by their excitement! They have to tell someone! And so they go to the disciples – surely they would love to hear this news!! But, oh dear…these words of hope fall on deaf ears. They think it’s all stuff and nonsense. An old wives’ tale. As the Orthodox Jewish Bible puts it, “Narrishkait”. How stupid. But even then, were their hearts tinged with perhaps just the tiniest possibility of hope?

Unsurprisingly, it’s the excitable, intuitive, act-now-think-later Peter who kind of gets it. Yes! I knew it! I just knew it!! But when he speeds off to the tomb, it’s almost like an anti-climax. He looks down into the grave and sees the graveclothes lying there and….then he goes home. Bemused – or - as one version states, “in unresolved puzzlement”.

**Fear of Hope**

Perhaps Peter was experiencing fear of hope. What if the resurrection had not occurred? What if the women were dreaming? What if the smell of the spices they were going to anoint the body with had overpowered them and they were hallucinating? What if….? You can imagine Peter wandering home in a daze…Jesus couldn’t really be risen. Could he…? I mean. Really?? Peter’s fear of hope stopped him from being his usual impetuous self. He was stopping himself this time from jumping to the right conclusion. After all, he had let Jesus down and denied him and run away. No, what the women had said back there couldn’t be true…could it...?

**Summary**

Words of Hope – “He is Risen!” Do you believe? That’s all Jesus invites us to do – believe him and follow him.

Memories of Hope – Not those halcyon days through rose-tinted glasses, but words spoken by the one who was and is and remains the Way, the Truth and the Life. Will you follow him, the one who can be trusted, the one who has overcome death and offers us life and hope?

Fear of Hope – Dare I trust these words spoken by another that Jesus is alive? What’s stopping me? In your own situation, what’s stopping me from daring to hope? Daring to hope if it’s true, if this whole message of the Godman Jesus rising to life might actually have a grain of believability to it…then what hope do I have? Every hope that we will be resurrected with him. Hope that drives away fear. Because perfect love casts out fear. Dare to believe in Hope. Today. Now. Hope is alive.

Sadly we don’t have time to read on to the end of Luke where other disciples meet Jesus on the road to Emmaus. But their experience was borne out with the words, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the scriptures to us?” That fear of hope was burned away and replaced with a sure, certain confidence and transformation that Jesus was – and is – alive.

As we gather around the Lord’s Table this Easter Morning, we remember that it was likely the Disciples had locked themselves away in the same upper room where Jesus had shared the last supper just a few days before.

**Read Luke 24:35-41**

This meal today is the familiar bread and wine. It’s not fish. But we hear the words of Jesus: Peace be with you. The resurrection of Jesus gives meaning to the sacrament of Communion. Like Jesus with those on the road to Emmaus, we break bread with the Risen Lord.

And so, as we prepare to eat bread, we remember the great sacrifice Jesus made for us, his body broken for us on the cross. But,

“God not only raise our Lord from the dead; he will also raise us by his power” (1 Cor 6:14).

As we share the cup, we are reminded of the promise of Revelation 1:18: “I am the living one; I was dead and now I am alive for evermore”.

(After everyone has been served the elements), Together we say:

“Your death, O Lord, we commemorate.

Your resurrection we confess.

Your second coming we await for.

May your mercy be upon us.”

Almighty Father, you made glad the disciples with the sight of the risen Lord. Give us such knowledge of his presence with us, that we may be strengthened and sustained by his risen life and serve you continually in righteousness and truth. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

***Prayers for peace in our world, our land, our situations and our church***

**Benediction:** I pray that God, the source of all hope, will fill you completely with joy and peace because you trust in him. [I pray] you will overflow with confident hope through the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen. (Romans 15:13).