

Easter 2019

A sermon by Tom Frame (21/04/19)

Each of the Gospel writers devotes considerable time to the resurrection of Jesus. It is the high point of the story ... the answer, the reflection, the interpretation of Good Friday. Today we have heard the Gospel of the resurrection according to Mark. The earliest Gospel of the four, Mark doesn't tell of encounters between the risen Jesus and his friends; we never see or hear from the resurrected Christ, in Mark's account. Mark certainly knew about those encounters; he believed in a resurrected Jesus; but he made a literary choice to end his Gospel like this: with the bold, joyous proclamation of the angel, and with the uncertainty, confusion, and fear of those charged with the good news. The story was still unfolding as he was writing.

I think Mark's Gospel is particularly relevant for talking about the resurrection in our times. For a lot of people, the idea of somebody literally coming back to life, after being dead – and dead for several days, mind you, not just in a coma on the operating table in a medical drama – that idea, in our modern, rational, post-Christian world, is frequently met with an uncomfortable silence. Surely, those outside the church might think, you don't believe he was dead and then was alive? That just does not happen; it defies the conventions of nature.

Resurrection is the church's fancy word for rising from the dead – both the great single event of Jesus' return, and the life beyond death that we believe awaits all God's people, however you draw that circle. (Our church tends to draw it pretty widely). And resurrection is hard to talk about, hard to preach about on several grounds, not least the absence of any human experience of resurrection. Those who might have drifted away from church just don't know whether they can swallow this kind of claim anymore. Those who were never really been part of a church, wonder what it's all about, what we're all about – and whether this claim is meant to be taken seriously. Resurrection is not the easiest place to start. But it's Easter Sunday, after all – resurrection is the main idea here. So ... where do we start?

What are we talking about when we talk about resurrection? There's the literal meaning: rising again from the dead. Scripture and tradition teach us that Jesus, raised from death by the power of God, has overcome the grave and defeated death, once and for all. The famous verse from John 3:16, which was our Gospel a few weeks ago, proclaims that God sent God's son into the world so that those who trust in him shall not perish, but have everlasting life.

Of course, those who believe in resurrection acknowledge that people still die ... their earthly bodies pass away. The Bible's authors knew that just as well as we do. But Jesus talked a lot about eternal life, a new life in God beyond our earthly existence. Thus, it became the conviction and teaching of the church that physical death is not an absolute ending but that it leads into another kind of life. The resurrection of Jesus opens the door to the resurrection to limitless existence and an endless future. This is a key concept.

In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul writes about the centrality of the Resurrection for Christians: "If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised ... then your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead."

What a claim ... but is it meant to be taken seriously? It's easy for us modern, rational, sceptical Australians to imagine that people 2000 years ago were superstitious and naive and didn't really understand death as we do, so it was easier for them to believe that somebody would come back from death. Not true; if anything, they were probably more in touch with the realities of death than we are, in our world where death is handled by trained professionals, behind closed doors. But people knew perfectly well, in the first century, that people die ... and die in the midst of their families and friends ... and their bodies decay.

Remember the story in John's Gospel of Jesus raising his friend Lazarus from the dead? They warned Jesus, "Lord, it's been three days; when you open the tomb, it is going to smell." Death was no mystery to the early Christians. They had to reconcile belief in eternal life beyond the grave with the obvious truth of bodily decay. Searching for an image to help us come to grips with the paradox, Paul offers the everyday mystery of a seed sown in the earth giving rise to a plant: "So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed... For ... this mortal body must put on immortality."

Paul's poetic reflection on the mystery of resurrection is echoed in one of the prayers we use at funerals: "For to your faithful people, O Lord, life is changed, not ended ..." Even with two thousand years of theology and science behind us, I don't believe that we can really do any better than Paul at putting such words to the strange and elusive hope of the resurrection of the dead. The belief that those who have left this life and this world live on, in and with God, is not amenable to proof or explanation. It's one of the things we take on faith, no more and no less than the church did in Paul's time.

So that's one of the things we're talking about when we talk about resurrection: death still happens, but Jesus' rising from death means that death doesn't have the same grip, the same claim on us, that it had before. That we don't have to fear death, trusting that those we love, and we ourselves, will have everlasting life in God. But that's only part of what it means to be people of the resurrection. Indeed, we are missing out on a good deal of what our faith offers us, and asks of us, if we think of resurrection as an idea that only comes into play in the face of death.

What about resurrection in the face of life? As a daily orientation, a way of being? A few verses farther along in that same chapter, the apostle Paul writes, "I die every day!" There are so many areas of our hearts, our lives, our world, in need of transformation. Renewal. Resurrection.

A few weeks ago as a Lenten reflection, I was reflecting on the meaning of another of those words we use in church and don't examine nearly often enough: salvation. I looked at the Greek verb behind that English word, *sozo* (pronounced sode- so) – and all the ways it's used in the New Testament. *Sozo* can mean to save from a dangerous situation. To heal. To make well. To restore. To deliver from an ordeal. To rescue. To free. To keep, preserve, or protect. And it's used in situations ranging from real-world illness, danger, or bondage, to the metaphorical and spiritual conditions that mirror those outward realities.

What the centrality of that word and concept in our Christian scriptures says to me ... is that this is God's intention, God's desire, God's purpose for each and all, in individual lives and human history. *Sozo*: what God does, stirring mysteriously in human hearts; acting in the spaces left by our freedom, our wills, our choices; subtly bending history's long arc. To free, to heal, to make well, rescue, deliver. To save. The word *Sozo* was on my mind again this week as I reflected on resurrection. Resurrection faith is much more than simply believing that Jesus rose from death, or even that we will rise from death. It's believing and trusting that this is the kind of God that God is: the kind of God who acts, sometimes invisibly, sometimes dramatically, to bring wholeness from brokenness, freedom from bondage, life from death.

The tenth-century theologian Symeon wrote that when Jesus becomes fully alive in us, "everything that is hurt, everything that seemed to us dark, harsh, shameful, maimed, ugly, irreparably damaged, is in Him transformed and recognised as whole, as lovely, and radiant in His light." That's resurrection faith. There is an echo in the words of the American theologian and civil rights leader Martin Luther King, who wrote, "I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. This is why right, temporarily defeated, is stronger than evil triumphant." That's resurrection faith and it animates lives.

And living as people of resurrection faith means seeking resurrection in this world, this life. Expecting renewal, reconciliation, restoration. And more than seeking and expecting: colluding with it. Becoming a co-conspirator with God in the continuing always-and-everywhere work of transforming the world towards hope and healing, justice and mercy, love and delight. That's what church is all about, what we're all about. Bearing witness to resurrection. Being agents of transformation. We are to be people who seek and strive and hope for new life, not only in the next world, but in this one, here and now.

Alleluia! Christ is risen.