

Hymns: **298 Christ the Lord is risen today**
 272 From heaven you came helpless babe
 306 Now the green blade rises
 443 Come let us sing of a wonderful love
 313 Thine be the glory

Readings: **Isaiah 65.17-25**
 Luke 24.1-12

“Why do you look for the living among the dead?”

Prayer

May the words of my lips and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, o Lord our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Today we stand in the full stream of God’s compassion, drenched in the possibility of new life. Forgiveness, justice, rebirth: salvation is ours, and the world’s.

And yet the question ‘Why do you look for the living among the dead?’ is as apt for us as it was for those women who went to Jesus’ tomb. It is a fair question, helpful to us as we grapple right alongside the other disciples with what resurrection can mean.

A couple weeks ago I was walking out of New Street Station in Birmingham – I was wearing a clerical collar, so was I was identifiable either as a Christian, or else as someone with especially perverse fashion sense.

A man was begging and approached me for money – all very pleasant. I wasn’t going to give him money, but I asked if he’d had lunch – the pleasant came to an end as he started a loud rant. Loud enough for heads to turn and people to see what was happening.

What stuck in my mind is that this man didn’t abuse me, he abused God: and at full volume - ‘Your God is for sugar (he didn’t say sugar); your God is nothing! What good is your God?’ And more.

I went on my way, but I got a fairly complete version of Psalm 22 before he was finished – ‘My God, my God why have you forsaken me?’ These were Jesus’ words on the cross, the words of Psalm 22. We heard them in this church on Friday – and they have as much weight this morning, Easter, as they did then.

Thinking about the challenge of that man, it is no wonder to me that when the women (Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary mother of James and the others) came back to the other

disciples with news that Jesus had risen from the dead, the others thought it was an 'idle tale,' more fake news, not at all believable.

Fortunately it was not their belief, it is not our belief, that made it true.

Friends, mindful of the question, 'Why do you look for the living among the dead,' I want to offer two little reflections about resurrection – this resurrection of Jesus Christ, whom we worship today.

First reflection.

Our shops are full of Easter eggs – this wonderful English tradition. The egg pregnant with chick a universal sign of new life.

And you know if you have ever watched a chick being born, that extraordinary moment when its beak breaks the shell from the inside – and then gradually, inexorably frees itself.

And then the shell, which has been everything – life, protection, food, and world – the shell is rubbish.

Sometimes folk slip to talking about Jesus rising from the dead as if resurrection meant simply that he came back to life. This would be like offering the chick being born a bigger eggshell in response to its growth.

Resurrection is not just a bigger eggshell— Jesus was changed. His own closest friends did not recognise him, until they did – so when we are asked 'do we believe in the resurrection,' we are not being asked if Jesus mortal body came somehow back to life as it had been. The Gospels never claim this for Jesus, it would miss the point. Rather, they witness a glimpse of a different world, a different, new being brought back to life – Jesus is changed.

When we are asked 'do we believe in the resurrection,' we are asked to imagine a reality outside the eggshell, while we are yet chicks to be born - that most counter cultural of things, a mystery. And by God's grace, by the testimony of prophets, by the witness of the Holy Spirit – we do not need to imagine that world, because it is real, and already among us.

Asking 'why do you seek the living among the dead,' is like saying why would you look for a grown chicken in the shards of eggshell.

And in our own lives, when we think about dying with Christ, that we may rise with Christ – we are not talking about just more and more things to insulate us from need – we are not talking about each of us as is, but with more money, more friends, somehow magically protected by thicker shells and deeper pension pockets from the work of this life. All these are good things, but they do not save us. And they surely do not save our world.

Dying with Christ that we may rise with Christ – participating in this resurrection – which is what we commit ourselves to at Baptism – here is good news that just like a newborn chick, we get more than a bigger eggshell.

And just like the newborn chick, we may find ourselves perplexed, disoriented, fragile – just like the women at the tomb, just like the disciples.
That’s the first reflection about resurrection.

The second.

And for this we go back to the true witness of the man begging in the Birmingham station, and the words of Psalm 22.

If resurrection is more than just a coming back to life, it is also more than just a worldly victory. Not just a return to the triumphalist, misplaced hopes of the crowd on Palm Sunday.

Jesus did not help nor heal every person.

He healed, he comforted as a sign of the kingdom of God come near. A glimpse of heaven before its time, if you will. The promise of the Psalms, and of the resurrection itself is that, as we have said in this Church, we will see the goodness of God in the land of the living.

I don’t want to wait for heaven till I die, myself. And this is what resurrection means – new life – in the here and now – as we are drawn into the pattern of resurrection in the way we live.

A few weeks ago I heard about a town called Dannebrog, Nebraska. It is a small place – in the middle of the United states, founded in 1871 by a group of Danish immigrants from Milwaukee Wisconsin. It’s population was 303 in the 2010 census – a few of us here are from places like Dannebrog, in our many countries of origin – small places, backwater places.

And Dannebrog suffered some devastating floods a few weeks ago. These floods didn’t even make our news – but utterly destroyed among other things, a little community art centre owned by the Pawnee tribe of native Americans, and looked after by a man called Roger Welsch. Roger Welsch used to be a news caster for one of the national Sunday programmes, and he retired to Dannebrog.

Roger told how he and his buddy Mick got down to the art centre to it swamped by sandbags, muck, and water. This is Roger’s own words:

‘He said, ‘The inside of the Arts Center was a total muck drenched, water-soaked mess. I staggered back out to my truck and sat on the tailgate completely defeated. What I saw was a disaster beyond repair.’

But Roger didn’t stop there.

he went on – Roger’s words again:

...’within minutes, strange things began to happen. People appeared from everywhere. Faces I didn’t recognize. Who are these people? ... groups of nonsense, organized, equipped men tromping in and out of the Arts Center, pushing

open the back door, and setting pumps to work. I hadn't contacted or hired anybody with pumps. I don't know anybody with pumps.

I stopped one of the men and asked him who they were. He said they were just a group who heard about the disaster and had come to help. A church group? Well, yes, that wasn't the point, he said. "We're just here to help." What church? "It doesn't matter; were just here to help."

The community in Dannebrog still have to deal with all the rebuild – and still have very little economic base, very little to hold the young people - the damage is real, but Roger Welsch has hope. They are not alone. They never were.

Don't for a moment think this is a sentimental feelgood story – any more than resurrection is a return to the triumphant misplaced hopes of Palm Sunday – victory, yes – but not just in easily recognised worldly terms. Is the work of forgiveness of sin, redemption of a broken heart or history, ever without cost?

God refuses to leave the world to its own devices – and so a group of Birmingham Methodists has this week walked in pilgrimage to London, carrying a cross fashioned from knives that have been handed in to police or to the church. Resurrection.

And Parisians gather today outside of Notre Dame Cathedral. Resurrection

And in some small corner of a back street, someone opens a door to , to hope, to faith. And we build. We pray. We commit ourselves to the work of loving one another as God has loved us – resurrection.

We are living in the days of Isaiah: when the wolf and lamb shall eat together, when men and women shall live long and no baby shall die an infant, when the all of creation is restored, economy shall feed and clothe everyone – when the angels question in the garden 'why do you look for the living among the dead? Becomes redundant. It is not redundant yet, that question. So we work, and we love, with Mary and Joanna and Mary, and the other disciples.

Are you perplexed today? Are you wondering, or finding resurrection more of an idle tale than you wish you did?

You would be in good company. But remember, Jesus did not wait to rise until his friends believed it.

Sit with the testimony of the women from the tomb long enough to wonder – look for the signs of his coming, in water, wine, bread, and love.

Do not look for the living among the dead- Jesus is abroad in our world. Victory over death itself, victory for creation, for good, for God. Glimpses of heaven, resurrection days. He is not here, Alleluia he is risen.

Happy Easter, everyone.