

REFLECTION EASTER SUNDAY 9TH APRIL 2023

ST. ANDREW'S ON THE TERRACE

By Rev Dr Fei Taule'ale'ausumai

Easter Day is the culmination of Holy Week, of Passiontide, of Lent, and indeed of our Christian faith. In my experience, it can be hard at such a major festival to know what to say that has not been said so many times before. For me, what are the ways to help us to recognise moments of transforming grace not only in the scripture readings of Easter morning, but also in their own lives?

Today we celebrate the resurrection and the transformation of pain into new life. Importantly, this is not a negation of pain, not a pretending that it has never been, but a moving through pain and loss to an entirely unexpected new beginning. The unexpectedness is a key point.

Barbara Brown Taylor makes the point that Easter is not the kind of natural transformation of a seed or a bulb to a flower: Resurrection ... is entirely unnatural. When a human being goes into the ground, that is that. You do not wait around for the person to reappear so you can pick up where you left off—not this side of the grave, anyhow. You say good-bye. You pay your respects and you go on with your life as best you can, knowing that the only place springtime happens in a cemetery is on the graves, not in them. (Barbara Brown Taylor, "The unnatural truth," *The Christian Century* 113, no. 10 (20.03.1996).)

One of the main challenges of Easter is to help us to identify resurrection moments in within our own lives.

We might reflect on where resurrection happens for us, or for those we know: where in our lives is grief, and where in that grief does hope or joy break through? As Easter people we need to be able to say that we are deep in a Good Friday or Holy Saturday experience and not yet ready for Easter Sunday.

One of the deepest questions raised by resurrection faith is: what does it mean to say that death is conquered when people continue to die? Perhaps one way to tackle this question is to reflect on that language: should we affirm rather that the power of death has been conquered, rather than suggesting that death itself is no more? It may be helpful to think of Easter as an on-going process, or a series of moments in which new life breaks through into what had seemed hopeless situations.

On Holy week 2003 I was in North Shore hospital with a suspected dissected aortic aneurysm, which means that the vein to the heart had blown up like a balloon and the wall of the vein had already begun to disintegrate. The consequences meant that I would have had to have immediate surgery which would have involved replacing the vein with plastic tubing, the operation itself not a guaranteed success, it was a 50-50 chance of survival. I did not understand much of the terminology or jargon they were using let alone the dire seriousness of the whole situation. Perhaps that was a good thing. Somehow I didn't want to know, and the nurse told me off because I didn't seem too worried. I'm not sure how to give you the reader's digest version of my ordeal but the reason why I want to share this experience in this morning's sermon is because of the simple prayer that my brother George prayed at the hospital. Two different sets of x-rays taken at two different places, one at A & E in Lincoln Road and another at North Shore Hospital had come back with the same verdict. I now had to have a CT Scan to confirm things. My siblings and my friend Robyn gathered around

the hospital bed and George prayed he said "God let the x-rays be wrong and let the CT Scan show something else that is not serious". By 3.30am the doctor returned, and they were quite baffled, the CT Scan showed that there was no dissecting aortic aneurysm. I had to stay in hospital with viral pleurisy, which is painful in itself, but the big scare was over. It was at that point when everyone had gone, and I lay alone in the observations room in the dark that I realised the enormity and seriousness of the whole situation.

This was my resurrection miracle for Easter 2003, there was definitely a lesson in it for me in terms of priorities and self-care, and there is definitely a message in it for us about the presence of God in the midst of uncertainty and fear.

Mary Magdalene and the other Mary come to the tomb where Jesus had been laid and find it empty. One curious aspect of Matthew's account is the description of the earthquake, which ruptures the tomb and terrifies the guards but to which the women seem not to react at all. The women are not alarmed by the earthquake because they were not there when it happened. Nonetheless, fear is a theme in Matthew's account. Both the angel and the risen Christ tell the women, "Do not be afraid" (Mt 28: 5,10), and Matthew depicts the women as consumed with "fear and great joy" (Mt 28: 8). Their joy does not entirely conquer their fear, and they hold both emotions as they bear the news of Christ's resurrection.

For Matthew the first encounter is with angels, who send the two women to take the news to the other disciples. It is as they are obeying the angel that they encounter the risen Christ on the way, and Christ tells them that the other disciples will encounter Him in Galilee. There is something here about the ways

that we receive our own calling and how it may be in following that calling – and not at the moment of calling – that we encounter Christ.

John's account of the resurrection is the only one to bring Peter and other male companions to the empty tomb. Mary calls them to come to see that the Lord's body has gone, and they see, and they even believe, but they do not stay, because they have not understood. It is Mary, remaining at the place of her loss, who meets the risen Christ and who comes to understand the good news of the resurrection. Who in the gospel accounts of the resurrection sees, believes and understands? Who sees and does not believe, or who sees and believes but does not understand? Who believes without seeing (for instance in Luke's gospel, not read today)?

Have you ever experienced a time when you just can't take it anymore, when you have nursed a loved one for months or years and their needs have taken a toll on your own health? When your grief has consumed your whole being that you wish you were one that died and not your beloved. When you have finished working two long 8-hour shifts at 2 different jobs and you come home to look after the needs of your family. When the alarm goes off and you feel and there is absolutely no way you can force yourself to get up, but you have to. When someone abuses us or someone we love or hurts us in ways we never thought imaginable, our world comes crashing down. When the whole world seems to have left you behind and there is no purpose or relevance in it for you anymore. Or you would be doing everyone a favour if you just didn't exist anymore. God take this cup of suffering away from me! Does this sound familiar? Why me Lord, I have always been faithful, I have never strayed away from your will, why me? Is this what it means to be crucified? Is this what it feels like?

And then after time the scales fall from our eyes, our heart somehow finds the will to keep going. We have managed to keep don't even know where the strength came from, how did I get here? Somehow we managed to survive all that pain, all that suffering. I was so empty, I had no strength, no energy, how did I survive? God you never left me, was it you who carried me through all that suffering? The aha, finally we recognize God in the midst of our suffering. The two folk walking down the Emmaus Road didn't realize for some time that Jesus was walking with them because they were consumed in their grief that they were oblivious to the Christ who was walking beside them. Thank you God for giving me the strength, thank you God for carrying me through the valley of the shadow of death. Yes God I know now that there cannot be a resurrection without a crucifixion.

It seems to me that one of the reasons that Easter Sunday continues to be so important, even for nominal Christians, is that it is a celebration of hope. Easter is an important symbol, even in predominantly secular society, pointing to the possibility that there is something more meaningful than the humdrum and often painful everyday existence on this earth.