

## Sermon Easter Day Year B 2021

My dear people, what a great joy to welcome you to our celebrations today. What a great joy that together we *can* celebrate the saving mysteries of our faith! A lot can happen in a year. And last year, last Easter, of course, we were prevented from being here, from sharing in these celebrations. We were limited to five people in church last Easter. And with an iPhone on a tripod and amateurish attempts at livestreaming we did the best we could. Whatever freedom and sense of normality we have clawed back, we are aware how fragile even this is, as events in Queensland this past week have shown. Yet another reminder of how fragile our situation. Just another reminder how a naturalist and materialistic view of the world consistently pulls us short.

Yet, the past year gave many pause for thought. Life under COVID gave us all a chance to re-examine our priorities, to reassess directions. It made us realise how so many of the preoccupations that fill our lives ring hollow. Yet how swift we have been to forget all that, to 'get back to normal' despite the insistence from some quarters that perhaps 'normal' isn't such a great thing to aim for. But because we are mostly regarded as cogs in a capitalist machine we have been urged to get back to the office, back to workplaces we neither enjoy or even like. Back to imposing on our kids impossibly crowded schedules. Back to neglecting little habits of simplicity and joy. Back to spending because the economy is the highest good. We ought not yet rush ahead and forget that at least we had the taste that things *could* be different...

There is a real hunger for meaning in our world, and one that is not easily met. In our culture, people don't know where to look to have this hunger satisfied, and have largely been robbed of the tools, and even the language, to know *how* to look. Now, there *are* many good and noble causes that men and women apply themselves in the effort to give life meaning. The holy - and essential - work of fidelity in marriage and the raising of children is surely one of them. We can note the altruistic work amongst the world's poor and vulnerable and the noble task of educating the young. So many of our young are captivated by political and environmental activism in the effort to create a more just world.

In fact, there is no shortage of ideologies we could apply ourselves to. But ideologies are human constructs. So often these disappoint, dependent as they are on human limitations. And it is our stubborn and persistent limitations - our failings, indeed our sins - that so often, once more, *frustrates* all our efforts to finding true and lasting meaning.

Saint Augustine in the fourth century knew something of this dilemma. He was, as a youth, intelligent and enquiring but also a bit of party animal. He liked a good time, had close friends, and a mistress along the way with whom - (unmarried) he had a child. He applied himself to one philosophy after another. But he was after something more. Finally, after a long struggle, he came to faith. Looking over his life and at the start of his spiritual autobiography, Augustine wrote '*our hearts are restless, O God, until they find their rest in you.*' He recognised that in each human heart there is a 'God-shaped' hole, filled only by faith and trust in God. Augustine recognised that his accumulation of experiences, and loves and clever ideas would never really satisfy, would never really give his life meaning. The only experience that would fill his hunger was the experience of God. Everything else - *because of their inbuilt limitations* - failed to satisfy.

Christians believe that these limitations can be overcome. In fact, what we celebrate today, this glorious Easter day, is that they *have* been overcome. All the limitations that disappoint and frustrate, all those things that fail us and thwart us, all those things that leave us empty and hungry are overcome. Christ *has overcome* our limitations. And it is the experience of him - risen, the conqueror of death - that satisfies our restless hearts. It is the experience of him that will give us meaning. Faith in Christ is not about an idea. It is not one more philosophy or moral code amongst so many. Christianity is not about finding a good way to live. Christian faith is about a person: a person who lives. Christian faith is about an encounter with that person, an *experience* of that person, Jesus Christ. Before it is a philosophy or moral code or way of life or a dogma or even a spirituality Christian faith is *an encounter*. It is an encounter with a person, and a person who *even now* can be known, loved and experienced.

In the gospel we hear today, we are told how Christ's grave clothes, the linen wrappings, are folded up and rolled up in a placed by themselves. A curious detail and we might wonder why John would bother, (as he tells of the most remarkable moment in all the history of the earth!!), about a load of laundry! He tells us because they are no longer needed!! They are folded up and put away because they no longer have a role. There is no longer a place for those things that sought to keep Christ bound and dead and in his cold, dark tomb.

It was the experience of encounter with their now living but once dead lord and friend that proved definitive and transformative for the first disciples. Their experience points us to the only *true experience* that gives meaning. Their experience was of One had overcome *all* limitations, including those of rejection, failure, violence, and ultimately of death. Without doubt, if Christ had not been raised then the hopes and dreams of the disciples would also have died. The only reason why there is a church today, the only reason why the first disciples recorded all these things in the scriptures, the only reason they took this message to the ends of the earth was because of *an experience* of the risen Lord, an experience which shook them to the core.

The first witnesses do not seek to give us *proof* about the risen Christ. But they do seek to tell us *about* him, how they *experienced* him. And whatever happened on that 'first day' it was evidently so inexplicable and yet so undeniable that it stretched all the ways they had to explain such an occurrence to breaking point. And yet this same event ended up reorienting the very centre of their faith and their lives. In almost every account, Jesus appears to people who are as yet unbelievers, who are doubting and confused. And meeting him, he turns demoralized betrayers and defiant sceptics into empowered witnesses. *Their limitations were overcome!* The experience of the risen Christ for them changed everything. And it is the experience that can change us. In a few moments we will all commit anew to our new life in Christ. We affirm again how Christ's risen life raises us above all the limitations of this world. On the glorious Easter day, we celebrate how we can meet Jesus, conqueror of death. It is the experience that will change us. It is the experience that will give our lives ultimate meaning. Amen.