

Fear/Easter

All Saints' Church, East St Kilda Easter Day 2023

Christ is risen! Alleluia

My theme today is ' *do not be afraid*' because "Jesus was charged with bringing the living to life."

Have you noticed how the denunciations of religion by secular humanists are just like the puritanical zeal of certain fundamentalist Christians? Each attacks the others or, indeed, their own people who hold different opinions.

I get embarrassed by fundamentalist or literalist Christians who bear the burden of absolute certainty. So I was intrigued to read that some atheists have the same problem. I read an article by a well-known atheist journalist about the internationally-known, very public, atheist Richard Dawkins: "Heaven's above, this po-faced cynic gives atheism a bad name!"

Easter was, and is, a time to relax and enjoy our faith rather than pointing at others. In fact, Easter, from the start was a time for laughter, fun and rejoicing. Eighteenth Century German pastors, following an ancient tradition, had to begin their Easter sermon with a joke. Perhaps I should do the same:

After church a young boy told the priest, "When I grow up, I'm going to give you some of my money." "Thank you," the priest replied. "But why?" The boy responded, "Because my daddy says that you are one of the poorest preachers we've ever had."

We are here today to celebrate, not to get fixated on the mechanics of resurrection but to rejoice in our resurrected Lord. We should be rejoicing, laughing, enjoying ourselves. There's great humour in Jesus' words and in God's dealings with us.

On a particular Sunday morning, God did something absurd in the face of our human solemnity about death. "Is death troubling you?" God says, "Here is an empty tomb." We have probably varied in our keeping of Lent. Whatever we did or didn't do, we can rejoice that it is Easter.

A priest in the UK used to go into the village pub every Sunday evening after Evensong and order two Gins and Tonic. He would drink them both and then order another two.

After a few weeks of this the barman asked him why he always bought his drinks in pairs.

"Well its quite simple really" he said, "when my twin brother moved to the Australia for work, we decided whenever we were out drinking we would always order two as a reminder of each other."

After a few months the priest came in and ordered just the one gin and tonic. The barman feared the worst.

"Is everything alright with your brother?" he asked.

"O yes" said the priest "its just that its lent and I have given up alcohol but my brother hasn't."

Eugene O'Neill once wrote a play called *Lazarus Laughed*. It is the story of Lazarus after Jesus brought him back from the dead. He laughs at everything, even at death. His home in Bethany is now called the "House of Laughter".

How many people out there believe that the Church is a place of laughter? In baptism we are *washed*, not starched! The French sceptic

Voltaire once said, “You Christians are going to have to look a lot more redeemed, if you expect me to believe in your Redeemer!”

We have been through a solemn time. There was plenty of fear around on the first Good Friday and Holy Saturday. The disciples were afraid of what might happen to them following Jesus’ death. They faced failure; they feared their own loss of freedom, their rejection, ridicule, and death. They faced the unknown, without their Teacher and Lord.

Only a small number of women had the courage to face up to their first fear and went to the tomb. They went without hope or expectation. They simply wanted to complete a decent burial for Jesus, which had had to be done in some haste on the Friday afternoon before the Sabbath began.

The angel who appears to the women says, ‘Do not be afraid’. When the risen Jesus meets them, he says the same, ‘Do not be afraid’. Familiar words from right back at Jesus birth, spoken to the shepherds, ‘Fear not’.

The empty tomb and the angel’s news is thrilling:. It is joyful, it is beyond understanding,. it is awe-inspiring; full of wonder and expectation.

Today we live in a world where there is much fear. In the Ukraine, in Syria, in the refugee camps in too many nations; in South Sudan and in Jerusalem and the West Bank, there are enormous fears. So, too, in some of our communities. Fears of domestic abuse and violence; fears of long-term illness following Covid; fear of dementia, fears for some of not having enough food, of the cost of power; fear of loneliness and hopelessness. And it’s not just the socially disadvantaged. Being

successful and having plenty of stuff is no guarantee of freedom from fears.

The risen Jesus whom we celebrate most particularly this day offers hope of overcoming failure, defeat, insecurity. He offers hope of renewal, new life, and resurrection. This is not easy hope; many will laugh it off. Christian faith and the Church have become fair game for crude and cruel humour these days.

We can take comfort in proclaiming the good news of resurrection. The first disciples discovered the power of the resurrection life that came with confidence in the risen Lord. This enabled them to overcome other fears—like death, rejection, ridicule, loss of freedom, and pain—because all of life was now lived in the light of Jesus' resurrection. Easter offers hope to all who live with fear, because it offers hope of renewal and new life.

A word to Joshua who is being confirmed:

All of this applies to you and those being baptised this morning. You are publicly standing to be a follower of the risen Jesus. Here amongst this community, you have great support, and will continue to do so. This is partly why regularly worshipping and praying together is an important part of the Christian life. We need one another, just as those first disciples needed each other. You will also find support from many who do not share your faith in Jesus. But there will be those who laugh, mock, and even make life difficult for you. So do not be surprised if, and when, some opposition to your faith comes. In facing any such situations, the risen Lord says to us, 'Do not be afraid.'

There will also be times when *you* don't fully live up to your calling in following Jesus. Do not be afraid. The Lord will not leave you or deny you. He will forgive and renew.

Just as Jesus called 'Mary' (Mary Magdalene) by name and she recognised his voice, he calls you by name. Remember, God loves you for who you are. You are not called to be anyone else. We are to be ourselves to the best of our ability and with the special gift of the Holy Spirit. Thank you, Joshua, for sharing this very privileged moment in your life with us.

I said these were words for Joshua and those being baptised but of course they apply to us all. The risen Lord calls us each by name. He goes on forgiving, renewing, and restoring us all when we fail him. We live in a world where many are caught up in lives of fear. Fear that restricts and holds people back from living full lives. The risen Lord says, "Do not be afraid". We are called to great joy. May we have that joy and walk in the newness of resurrection life. And so, we can laugh especially on Easter Sunday. For God has had the last laugh.

Christ is Risen. Alleluia!