

Lent sermon series for St Peter's, Limpsfield
Easter Sunday, 12th April 2020, 11am

**A journey through our humanity,
with Jesus**

Rev James Percival

Nine: **Fear and great joy** *Risen Life*
Gospel: Matthew 28:1-10

in the Live Stream Eucharist
(see <https://www.stpeterslimpsfield.org/live-streams.html>)

in a time of national and global emergency precautions
to resist the coronavirus pandemic

What I would like us to notice this Easter is that, having heard the startling good news from the angel, the women leave the tomb quickly *'with fear and great joy.'* *With fear and great joy.* These two things are not separate, not in their lives and their renewed faith, and not in our lives and our renewed faith either.

Sometimes it feels as if the understanding of our Christian story is that the fear and the darkness comes before, in the Garden of Gethsemane, and on Good Friday, as Jesus dies; and then great joy comes with the risen Christ today. And that's it. Happy ever after.

Certainly our Christian hope is decisively in what Jesus has done, and in the God who raised Christ from the dead that first Easter. But in the church's year, our season of Eastertide is as long as Lent, lasting seven Sundays, all the way to Pentecost.

The stories of the risen Christ which we remember over the coming weeks, and which resonate with our lives, have glimpses of great joy, but also some more misunderstandings, sorrows, doubts and fears.

So it is for us: the great joy of Easter we share again today does *not* always and forever cancel our lurking fears. Especially at this time when we are physically isolated, and there are plenty of fears around about loss not only of our freedom, but of our health, our wealth, our security and our future.

The fear and joy continue to tussle within us: in the supermarket, I suppose the excessive toilet roll buying is the fear at work (through in part of our household the anxiety has been around the complete lack of green pesto); the joy - again very evident, more than usual at this time - is in the solidarity with and care for others as well as ourselves.

There are other fears around the corner: for the Church, will this pandemic lead to its ruin in its present form, or its resurgence? We'll find out in the coming months and years. But Christianity began amid defeat and despair. Easter Day brings a new reality. Especially this year, 'getting back to normal' may not be an option. May God lead us on, for when we can resist the fear for ourselves and our own futures, and point instead to the love of God in the hearts and lives of people across the world, our joy is renewed.

And isn't this our experience in all our lives, however easy or hard we find it to believe in the resurrection, isn't this our experience that, when we resist our fear and give ourselves in love - however we can, by our care, our time, our prayers, our money, our gifts - then that joy is renewed in us afresh.

This reflects the presence of the crucified and risen Christ, Easter joy for us and for all the world. It is not separate from us and our daily lives, and it is not just for these or those special and set apart people.

When we express love and care for our neighbour, whether or not we are aware of it, we are showing something of the love of God with us in the world.

We are each invited again to share in that firm conviction that love will win. Not because of us, but because of the saving love of Christ, and the Resurrection. Life and love are - despite our doubts and fears - to be trusted. Whatever darkness we face, love will win. Whatever we fear, the great joy of Easter will bubble up again. Especially in this time of isolation, many of us can take the opportunity to rest and to take time to count what we have more than what we have lost. We have a chance to notice again what really matters in our lives.

The Celtic Christians of Britain, more than a thousand years ago, can help us. Their life was perilous and their prayers never ducked this fact, but they managed to hold together the fragility of life, the destructive power of nature and Vikings alongside a view that the world and all that is in it is fundamentally good. Or to put it another way, they believed more in original goodness than original sin. This gave them great resilience in the face of disaster.

Perhaps the truth of our faith will never be more tested than at this time - and never more essential to celebrate. Our spiritual ancestors lived with plagues and wars and illness. Their faith is passed down not as a hobby, but for human survival and refreshment.

The cross is transformed by the resurrection. The loss is transformed by love and new light. Looking back across our Lenten journey, when we make bad choices, give in to temptations, or strive for things that do not quench our thirst - this is not the end of the story.

You may have come across the Reverend Richard Coles, as a chart-topping pop instrumentalist in the 1980s, or more recently on *Saturday Live* on Radio 4. He's on again today at 1.30, as one of the *Three Vicars Talking* as he is also a Vicar in Northamptonshire. Richard's partner David died in December. He has reflected powerfully on this in the light of Holy Week and Easter, noticing that there is no new life without losing the old life; and that, amid sometimes overwhelming grief, sentimental or glib pieties are unbearable. But that the Christian faith isn't about them.

As I have said repeatedly through this Lent: the darkness is real. Loss is real. BUT so too is the light. The resurrection. We find out here and now by celebrating again the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead - as we do every Sunday morning. In doing so, we experience for ourselves new life - a passing from darkness to light. Whatever darkness, suffering or loss we bear, or will bear. The *fear and great joy* those women knew as they left the tomb continue to tussle in our hearts and in our lives. But Christ is risen. Love will win. Let's join in with the work of it again, however we can. This is the better way. A joyful and hopeful Easter to you all.

Amen.

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