

## **THE RESURRECTION**

*Alleluia. Christ is risen.*  
*He is risen indeed. Alleluia.*

It is extremely unusual for us to have Easter in term time. Being in university ministry as Revd Tim Ditchfield and I have been for far too long, it's like living in Narnia - it's always Advent and never Christmas, always Lent and never Easter. We have these wonderful green and purple outfits but, we didn't bother with the white and gold because College is closed at Christmas and Easter. With Easter being so very early this year it's very unusual, therefore, that the term has gone forward over Easter and that's why we processed in the palm frond at the start of our service that we had removed on Ash Wednesday. The palm frond is from our silver mantrap cross, made up of an extraordinary cross with its crown of thorns, which is based upon a working mantrap, and the palm frond, thinking of Palm Sunday, in the shape of a fish, one of the early Christian symbols for Jesus. The palm frond holds open the jaws of death and, as has been the tradition since the great Dean Sidney Evans in the 1960's, we shut the mantrap during Lent and then, during the first service of Easter, process it back in and spring open the jaws of death. I'm sure that in the old Deanery in Vincent Square, around the corner from where the Chaplain's house still is, this would have been done at 6am on Easter Sunday morning. Often, the Easter vacation falls between these two events, with our Passiontide service taking place at the end of the Spring term and, more usually, our first Easter service taking place at the beginning of the Summer term. So, at least, this term we had our Passiontide service last week with the stripping of the altars which was like our Good Friday and today is, if you like, our Easter Day.

Throughout this term we have been following the story to the cross and resurrection, particularly as told in Matthew's gospel. We started right at the beginning of term with Tim talking about the ancestors (Matt. 1.1-17), we've worked through the baptism (Matt.3.1-17) and the transfiguration (Matt. 17.1-13), the healing (Matt. 9.1-8) and teaching (Matt.12.1-8) ministry of Jesus, through to the events at Gethsemane (Matt.26.36-46) – the arrest, the trial (Matt.27.11-26) and his crucifixion (Matt.27.27-44) and, last week, his death (Matt.27.45-56). And so it's good to be able to come on to the end of the story and preach on the very last chapter.

What Matthew does very cleverly in that chapter is to tie together his whole account of Jesus that we have been following all term. And throughout, there's a sense in Matthew's account of a supernatural intervention and that Jesus is openly visible to everybody, and also of a desire to tie up loose ends and explain the difficulties. Where often in Matthew's source, probably Mark, which was often quite dark and riddling, Matthew brings the light in and we've seen that all the way through this term. If you've read Mark's account of the resurrection it has an enigmatic empty tomb, an absent Jesus, a strange young man, frightened women who were finally told after a gospel in which everyone has been told to keep quiet to go and tell people and they go off and say nothing to anybody because they are afraid – it is a very uncomfortable ending. Whereas in the account that we've just heard in Matthew we begin with yet another supernatural earthquake witnessed by the soldiers (Matt. 28.2-4), frightened but, obedient women who run off to tell others (Matt. 28.8) and who are rewarded by a vision of Jesus himself (Matt. 28.9-10), the explanation about what happened with the tomb and the guards (Matt. 28.11-15) and a final scene on a mountain (Matt. 28.16-20) - and mountains have been crucial all the way through Matthew's gospel. Matthew has crafted this chapter very carefully with three scenes, as he often does because he likes threes, so we have the believers for the first ten verses (Matt. 28.1-10), the opponents for the next five verses (Matt. 28.11-15) and then back to the believers again for the ending (Matt. 28.16-20).

His gospel began, if you remember, with an angel appearing in a dream to Joseph. It began with mountains, the Sermon on the Mount. It began with Gentiles, the Wise Men coming to Israel to worship Jesus as a baby in Bethlehem. And, now it ends, again, with angels and mountains and a command where the new Israel is sent to take the message out to all the Gentiles. In the same way that in Mark so often everything was hidden – the voice at Jesus' Baptism or that the Transfiguration was for him alone or for his close friends only – so too throughout Matthew, as we've seen this term, Jesus is clearly visible to everybody. So where Tim talked about the genealogy right at the start of term, the Revd Dr Simon Woodman preached on the baptism or Revd Sue Smith talked about the transfiguration – in each case the identity of Jesus was being made visible and his purpose made clear through the relevant passages. And, even when Revd Louise Ellis preached on the crucifixion and Jess Lane talked about the death of Jesus, we are reminded that the identity of Jesus was revealed, at the crucifixion, not just to the centurion who was at the foot of the cross but to everybody present.

And so now when we come to the resurrection, the first part of Matthew 28, we see that, unlike in Mark where the stone has already been moved (Mk.16.3), Matthew's account details another great earthquake, where the angel of the Lord, not Mark's 'young man', descends from heaven, rolls back the stone (Matt. 28.2-4) and his appearance reminds us of what we heard of in Sue's sermon on the transfiguration of Jesus. So now the angel, similarly, is like lightning with clothing

white as snow and there is all this kind of fear with the guards shaking and fainting and becoming like dead men before the angel speaks to the women. However, Matthew doesn't go as far as the apocryphal *Gospel of Peter* where the guards and the priests witness huge angelic figures bringing Jesus out of the tomb with a walking cross – here the resurrection seems to have already happened according to the angel (Matt. 28.6) who declares that Jesus isn't there as he has been raised, he is explaining what's happening. As the disciples in Matthew have their faith strengthened all the way through the gospel, as we have seen this term, similarly the women are not only just frightened, as in Mark's account, they go out quickly with fear but, also with great joy and are running to tell the disciples when they meet the risen Jesus himself, worship him and are instructed by him to go as apostles, or messengers, to give the message to his disciples to go to Galilee and to meet him so that they can all be together again in Galilee where all the ministry took place (Matt. 28.7-10). So, that's the first section of that chapter and it asks me the question, and I'd like to ask you the same question, who or which are we in the story? Are we the curious women, are we the guards who are frightened, are we the disciples who are missing out because of our fear and are in hiding?

The middle section of the chapter, again, gives us a question about different sorts of reactions – what you might call the old Israel and the new community of faith. We saw in the last couple of weeks in Matthew's account of the arrest of Jesus, his trial and crucifixion, something of the way in which Matthew explains what happened to Judas, taking the bribe, dealing with the chief priests before finally committing suicide, and so Matthew continues to explain the story of Israel and how that fits in with the story of Jesus. Only Matthew notes what happened to Judas and the chief priests, and he continues to tie up loose ends with his unique account of the guard being given money which has been placed on the tomb at the end of the previous chapter (Matt. 27.62-66) and now being given money to say that the disciples came and stole Jesus' body away while the guards were asleep (Matt. 28.11-15). This recalls the story of Judas, the only other place money occurs in Matthew. The drama group that I was once involved in had this wonderful John Cleese type version of this where the sergeant, or the centurion, was trying to find out what had happened and says to the soldiers, 'Oh, that's a really good story' and they reply, 'Yes, isn't it', before he answers, 'If you were asleep, how did you know that it was the disciples who stole it?'. And, you may have seen it, there's a new film called *Risen* with Joseph Fiennes as a Roman tribune who is tasked with finding out what happened to the body of Jesus and I commend it to you.

Then there is this idea that the story of the theft of Jesus' body by the disciples is told 'among the Jews to this day' (Matt. 28.15). Matthew was probably writing his gospel in the aftermath of the first great holocaust, the total destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple and the way in which Jews were pushed out of Jerusalem and out of much of the Holy Land, and the argument was going on between those who survived as they were forming themselves around the

synagogue and the law on the one hand and faith in Jesus as the Messiah on the other. Apart from calling Jesus 'King of the Jews' (Matt.2.2; 27.11, 29, 37), this is Matthew's only use of the term 'the Jews' and clearly they are now a different community from that of the evangelist, or the Teacher. This idea, that the story of the theft of Jesus' body by the disciples being told among the Jews to that day, certainly reflects that period of very difficult tension in the life of the synagogue and the early Christian disciples.

So, if that's what happens with those who are taking bribes and telling stories, what happens to Jesus' followers, thirdly? Well, they go to Galilee and back on a mountain and throughout this term we've seen how everything in Matthew's gospel takes place in and upon a mountain – we've had the Sermon on the Mount, the transfiguration on the mountain and we've also had healings on mountains and so on. And, we know, of course, that the disciples had betrayed and deserted Jesus and slipped away – Raymond Baudon talked to us about the Gethsemane story, the Revd Dr Keith Riglin preached on Peter and the desertion and Jess spoke on what it meant to be abandoned. Finally, we reach the climax of the gospel and all the various themes come together. We hear that, despite their 'little faith', the disciples, true Israel, go to Galilee and to the mountain where Jesus had directed them to go (Matt.28.16). The identity of Jesus is clear and when they saw him Matthew says that they worshipped him, though he also recognizes the mixed nature of the church by noting that even now some still doubted (Matt. 28.17). People will often say that they struggle to have faith today but, had they been alive at the time of Jesus then they certainly would have believed – actually, I think it was quite difficult to believe even then as they weren't quite sure what was going on and Matthew has that sense that there is a division.

This meeting on the mountain reminds us of all the other mountains of this gospel, and all that Sinai and Zion meant for Israel; but this mountain is in Galilee – described by Matthew at the very start of Jesus' ministry as 'Galilee of the Gentiles' (Matt.4.15). Despite his stress on the mission to Israel, Matthew has been preparing us for this since the beginning, with Abraham and Gentiles in Joseph's ancestry, and the wise men from the East (chapters 1-2). Now that Israel has rejected her Teacher, the disciples receive the so-called 'Great Commission' to go and make disciples of all nations. They are now to become teachers themselves, teaching others what the Teacher has commanded them. Right from the very first sermon where Tim spoke about the genealogy of Joseph's ancestry and unpacked that, Matthew is trying to make clear the purpose of Jesus and the way in which he came out of all the great history of Israel and yet there were gentiles and women involved in his ancestry and the wise men that came to worship him. Jesus then communicates a rather bizarre idea to the disciples, saying 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore...' (Matt. 28.8-19). In the same way that the risen Jesus told the women to go and tell the brothers, now he's telling all of the disciples to 'make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of

the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.’ (Matt. 28.19-20). Right at the beginning of the gospel, one of the names that Jesus was to be given was Emmanuel, meaning God with us, and this chapter ends with Jesus saying, ‘And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age’ (Matt. 28.20).

This term we have seen the revelation of God in Jesus throughout and in one sense there is no ascension, no departure, here. Jesus is with the disciples. There has been no hiddenness nor absence of God in this gospel – it’s not so much an ending, it’s more of a beginning and one which is all embracing. All authority has been given to Jesus but, we are to go to the whole world and teach them everything and then Jesus will be with us always to the end of the age.

And so I come back to my question, as I conclude, where are we in the story? Who are we? Are we at the tomb, are we the soldiers, are we the disciples on the mountain, are we the women, are we the ones who worship, are we the ones who doubt? And, will we have the courage to actually go in the authority of Jesus as we come to the end of this series, as we come to the end of this gospel, as we come to the end of this term, to be able to go out from here and take the good news of God’s new life in Jesus to everyone and, in doing so, find that he is with us always, to the end of the age?

*Amen.*

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