

Easter Day - Luke 24:1-12

In June 1998, a boy from, Donegal, Sean McLaughlin, and a few others from his class, met the Irish President Mary McAleese. They had written a poem, which they gave to her. She stuck it on her wall. In 1998, the Irish peace process was gathering pace. This was the year of the Good Friday Agreement. Their little poem began, *Orange and green it doesn't matter*. It ended imagining the day

we can travel hand in hand across the bridge of hope.

Just a few weeks later, Sean McLaughlin was killed, at the Omagh bombing. He was twelve.

That is a bleak beginning to a sermon. It is necessary, the gospel this morning begins at a tomb.

on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb

We have to make a beginning at Omagh, and places like it. On Easter Day we must start at the mosques in Christ Church, New Zealand, in Mosul, Quetta, and, Syria or in hospitals, hospices and at the places of our personal bereavements. We have to push chocolates, and bunnies, and posies aside. Easter is not about new life until you have been to a tomb and talked about death. It is always both /and.

Just after the Omagh bombing, a recording of another poem was released. The poem was by Seamus Heaney, and it was read by Liam Neeson.

Human beings suffer,
They torture one another,
They get hurt and get hard...

History says, don't hope
On this side of the grave.

Human beings get hurt and get hard... History says, don't hope. At places like Omagh, that is the lesson you learn. Death and suffering shut us down; they close us off. On Easter morning, that is where we begin.

Now, for the last few days we have been making our way through the story of Christ's Passion with the help of St Luke. It was Luke again this morning

on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb

All four gospels insist that Easter starts with a trip to the tomb. But only Luke insists that the women took spices that they had prepared earlier. Why does he insist on that little detail? Because he wants us to notice that the women are carefully obeying what the law requires. They did not help with burial because they did not have the necessary spices, and they could not bring them until the Sabbath was past. So they arrived as soon as it was dawn. We are

supposed to notice that they still believe, they think of continuity, consistency. And Luke, any only Luke, does something very clever. He adds in a bit of reflection on what they *did* and *did not* find.

They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body

This is Luke nudging us; you should feel his elbow in your ribs. This is Luke pointing out that we have *expectations* and that they are problematic. The women were worried about the stone. How were they going to get into the tomb to work with their spices? They were quite sure they would find a body.

They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body

Their expectations are overturned. You and I, like the women at the tomb, cope with difficulty by managing it, by coming equipped. Remember that poem after Omagh,

Human beings suffer...
They get hurt and get hard...

History says, don't hope

That is it exactly. We step into difficulty and we expect it to be difficult. We are hurt and hardened, we look down (the women at the tomb bowed their faces to the ground). We are pessimistic. History says don't hope.

Luke has nailed our pessimism; he shows it to us. He shows us how hope dies. In his gospel, and again, only in his gospel we hear the women challenged.

Why do you look for the living among the dead?

Expectation has these women cramped and confined. They are loyal to the past, they have kept the tradition and obeyed the law. They have courage to face a death, it is these women and only these women who get to the tomb this day, others have fled. It is precisely because they have seen the reality of death, felt its force and known its reality that they are equipped to be messengers of resurrection. They will never say 'he was not really dead' or 'we do not know what has happened'. These women can and must say 'he was dead. He is alive'. They are witnesses to death, but that very fact has crushed their hope. They expect death and nothing else, They expect so little.

Why do you look for the living among the dead?

That is why we started with Omagh this morning. Because it is where these women began, at a tomb, sure of the reality and finality of death. And, make no mistake, Jesus was dead. Indeed, he is still dead. His death is still real; still every bit as brutal and vile as we knew it to be on Friday. The resurrection does not set that death aside. Easter does not tell us "That

is over now, there, there; all better”. Jesus on Easter Day is dead and alive, death is gathered up into his victory. Easter does not change that.

What Easter changes is our expectation. Easter tells us that death is still true, still to be feared, but yet there is hope. This *and* that. Death *and* life. Fear *and* Hope. Let me read you the rest of that Seamus Heaney poem, the one that told us, *History says, don't hope*

But then, once in a lifetime
The longed for tidal wave
Of justice can rise up
And hope and history rhyme.

So hope for a great sea change.
On the far side of revenge.
Believe that a farther shore
Is reachable from here
Believe in miracles
And cures and healing wells.

That is why we celebrate Easter – a great sea change. Because, although horror still looms over Omagh, still inflicts terror, still wields a knife on our streets or raises a fist in our home, we can hope. Although it is still true that we live with loss and violence; although that is what we expect, we can hope for more. Death is serious and hard, but death does not define us. It is the Christ who shows us what life and death should look like and those courageous women at the tomb finally lifted their faces and looked up.

So hope for a great sea change.
On the far side of revenge.
Believe that a farther shore
Is reachable from here
Believe in miracles
And cures and healing wells.

That is the gospel, it starts with death and does not end there. It is hope, the future, the Kingdom. Happy Easter.