

Evensong Easter Day

Matthew 28:1-10

First let me clear up a misunderstanding. For the record, I don't have a problem with Easter Eggs. People seem to think that, because I am a Dean, I must disapprove of Easter Eggs; that Easter Eggs are the wrong story. So let's be clear, I gave up chocolate for Lent. I would be happy to be given an Easter Egg.

But, there is a problem with telling the wrong story at Easter. It has nothing to do with eggs or bunnies and it is my job to try and clear it up. The wrong story at Easter is that Jesus was dead and now he is alive again. Let me explain. Let me compare two stories

The first story begins at about 10.30 on the night of 17th March 1907. A storm had broken off the Cornish coast and fog covered the Lizard peninsula. Navigating blind the SS Suevic ran aground on the rocks of the Maenheere Reef. There were 456 people aboard. By 4.25, in the morning, lifeboats began to arrive and, over the next twelve hours, they saved everyone on board. It is still the largest rescue in the history of the RNLI.

The second story starts late one night in October 1976. A Dallas police officer stopped a car without headlights. As he walked towards the car, he was shot twice and killed. The police traced the car and found a witness who said the killer was a man called Randall Adams. Adams was convicted in 1977 and sentenced to death. Later, the death sentence was overturned on a technicality and Adams got a life sentence. By 1988, it was known that two witnesses had lied, Adams had not even been at the scene of the crime. He was released in 1989, after twelve years in prison. He was never pardoned and never compensated.

In the first story two things happen. A ship is wrecked and lifeboats rescued the crew. It is a happy ending. One thing, a disaster, turns into another, a rescue. In the second story there are also two events, a conviction and then an acquittal. But the story does not change in the same way, there is no happy ending. You need both bits of information to know the story properly, to understand it, but is not a happy ending.

When we talk about Easter, we must understand that today is not the happy ending to the horrid business of Good Friday. Today we *do not* say that Jesus was dead and now he is alive again. Jesus died on Good Friday. His life ended 'and that was the end' (Nicholas Lash). That is why the gospels go to such trouble to tell us that the Risen Christ had the marks of the nails. It was a *dead* body they saw.

Easter is not the happy ending to Good Friday. Easter is the *explanation* of Good Friday. Easter is the way you look at Good Friday.

Why does this matter? Why is it important that you do not tell the wrong story about Jesus being dead and then being alive again? Well it matters because it is not true. Jesus died and was dead. And it matters because Christian faith is not a sort of cosmic joke. We do *not* say here that death might seem frightening, but it is alright really. Death is fearsome, desertion, betrayal, torture, injustice all those other things visited on Jesus they are evil and they remain evil. God does not..., God will not..., God never... murmurs 'there, there'.

Once we have understood that, once we have understood that Easter does not cancel out Good Friday we can begin to think about what Easter *does* say about Good Friday. Jesus was betrayed, deserted, beaten, unjustly condemned, crucified and killed. God in Christ endured that, took it to himself. And, at Easter, everything that looked as though it was *just* an ending, *just* a failure, *just* a defeat begins to look like something else. Christ still exists. God's commitment to human life is not over. What began has not finished. That is what matters about today. Evil and despair do not win. There is still hope.

There is still evil. And, there is still hope. We heard Matthew's gospel read. Each gospel tells us about the resurrection, and each picks our details we should think about. Matthew is interested, really interested, in what happens just before Easter. Our reading this afternoon began

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning

After the Sabbath, he tells us that because he wants to remind us of what has just happened *before* the Sabbath. Only Matthew tells us that there was an armed guard set on the tomb. Only Matthew wants us to know that the chief priests went to Pilate and asked for the guard. 'If you don't do this', they said, 'his disciples will steal his body and tell everyone he has been raised from the dead'. Matthew wants us to notice that Jesus is put to death after a mock trial, unjustly. Then he wants us to know that force and military might were used to shut down the conversation and that religious leaders, on the Sabbath in Passover, at a holy time of year, still conspired against God.

And it goes on... the armed force, the same story of despair and denial, all that goes on. Sarin gas in Syria, missile tests in the Sea of Japan, murders in Westminster, cynicism, mistrust us rather than them. That is the world we still live in. When Jesus rises at Easter those things are still unjust, still an affront, still an agony, but they are not the last word. There is still hope. That is the story in Easter. Not that he is alive again, but that death is not the last word. Might and armed force will not prevail and nor will denial and despair. It was the guards at Easter who looked like dead men, that is what Matthew says. They looked dead and Jesus rose. Death is not what we thought it was and neither is life.

Jesus is overcome and dies on Good Friday. At Easter it is death that is overcome. That is the story we need to tell.