

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH

EASTER MORNING

SUNDAY 8 APRIL 2012

Rev. Anneke Oppewal

John 20: 1-18; Galatians 2: 19-21

“New Life”

Most of us will have experienced loss in our lives. Most of us will know the feelings of desolation and emptiness that follow the death of a loved one. Most of us will, in one way or another, be familiar with what it means to find your balance again after such an event, rediscovering the treasures love has left in your heart and the traces of goodness that still linger in your soul after a loved one has departed. Realising, with gratitude and wonder, that the memory of who and what someone was for you is still alive and at work in you. That although their earthly life may have finished, they are still present. Their love still at work within you. Enabling you to love because you have been loved.

Reading the Easter story some may wonder if that is what the disciples found out. That although Jesus was dead, the memory of who and what he was, was still very much alive in them, still at work, and in an amazingly strong way. It is possible. But what the gospels tell us about is not that gradual slow process of working through grief and coming to terms with it we all know so well. A process that will take from a couple of months to a couple of years for most of us. Three days is not enough if you've truly loved and been touched by someone. Three years would be a more likely length of time necessary to come to a point where you'd be ready to move on and enter into a new phase of your life.

Some have suggested it was even more than that. That the first thirty years after Jesus died were spent by his followers to come to terms with his death, and the next thirty years to find words to talk about it, and the thirty years after that to start writing about the impact his life and his death had had on him. All in all ninety years until the documents now found in the New Testament were ready to testify that something of eminent significance had happened in Jesus' life. Moreover that his death had life changing significance, even for those who never had or never would meet him. That what he left behind after parting from this world was beyond “just” the memories of love and traces of goodness every other human being adds to the pool of death-defying light that gives us hope and the strength to go on after someone has passed away.

Paul, writing in that first block of thirty years after Jesus' death had never met Jesus. Nor had any of the Galatians he is writing to. For Paul it is not coming to terms with loss that spurs him on. It is coming to terms with being found, being bowled over by a living reality he is struggling to find words for. He identifies that reality as the Jesus that died a few years before on a hill just outside Jerusalem and was buried in a tomb close by. But for him there is far more than the memory of a man who lived an exceptional life and died an undeserved death. There is life, there is light, there is the divine breaking into his life in a way he has never experienced before. An experience he can't stop talking about.

Paul knows about the historical Jesus from the stories others have told him, but what comes before that, and is far more important to him, is the experience of the living Christ changing his life. Everything he knew, he says, and he knew quite a bit about faith, he had had to let go. He was subjected to a complete makeover. He lost faith as he had known it before. He lost what and who he was. So significant has this change been that he describes it in terms of death and dying, of being

crucified even, indicating that this change took away everything he could have boasted about. That it was stripped away to make room for this new identity. "I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me."

I think for most of us it will be impossible to grasp what that means. That there will be few of us who would describe their faith, or their relationship with Christ in those, life and death, terms. And yet I think that it is here we touch the heart of Easter.

Not at the empty tomb, but here when someone who never met Jesus testifies that his life has been completely changed by him nevertheless. There is more here than a dead man living on in the memories of his friends. A power and a presence has been released in the world that has the ability to change lives, to change the world, to make God's presence felt as something that is alive and active. And not just any power or presence, but a presence that bears the distinct hallmark of the faith lived out by Jesus of Nazareth. When that power breaks in after Easter it is not just recognised as any manifestation of the divine, it is recognised, by his disciples and by others, as his, as Jesus' power, Jesus' love, Jesus' compassion, Jesus' hope, Jesus' faith breaking through.

What we testify to at Easter is that over time, over two thousand years of faith, Church and theology, with all its ups and downs, positives and negatives, that power is still here today. Here and now, breaking into lives and manifesting itself, just like it did on that first Easter morning when Mary met the risen Lord for the first time, or at that time when Paul felt all he thought he knew melt away to be replaced by something new and different he had not known before.

Christ lives, and he calls us to die. To let die what we think we know, what we believe is important. To let something new and powerful take over where our faith may have become stale and stodgy. To let Christ in, and everything that doesn't tally out. Let Christ take over. To take a deep breath and let Christ take charge of our lives. To let go of what we thought we knew and let God breathe new life into us. Let die, trusting that God is not finished with the world or with us yet. That there is more and different to be experienced of God's mind-boggling grace around the corner.

To be liberated, to know ourselves to be free. Imagine what that could mean! A life free of the anxiety of what may, or may not, come. Trusting that as we don't know what is around the next corner we may as well leave it to God. And expect it to be good, and positive. A Church free of fear of change, of stifling dogmatics and age old traditions that make sure the stone of imagination and generosity of Spirit can't be rolled away because it may lead us somewhere revolutionarily different.

Our faith, Easter, the event we celebrate every Sunday is not about letting things stay the way they are or about letting our angst for life get the better of us. It is about moving into something inexplicably, unbelievably exciting and different.

Living in Christ is living inside the powerful presence of one who defeated the power of evil and death. It is about letting Christ move in us, and letting ourselves be led by his Spirit.

There is no right way, there is no right faith, there is only letting ourselves be pulled into the powerful, life-changing, presence of Christ. Losing our fear, letting ourselves be stretched beyond the limits of generosity and compassion with him and through him. Because he has shown us that that is what real, everlasting life and love is made of.

Paul tells us Christ is seeking to live in us, longing to set us free, aching to let his love and compassion melt our fear and limited trust away and replace it with a life "in Christ", that lives the experience of a risen, living Lord with generosity, and abandon to change the face of the earth wherever it takes

root and starts to grow. Amen.