

**NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH
EASTER 2
INDUCTION OF ROSS PEARCE
SUNDAY 7 APRIL 2013
Rev. Anneke Oppewal
John 20: 19-31; Acts 5:27-32**



“Doubt and Certainty”

We've celebrated Easter with high halleluiahs, dressed the Church in white and covered it with flowers, we shared bread and wine and rejoiced in the light of a new day dawning over the world.

But now it is a week later and reality is starting to kick in, pretty soon everything is back to normal. The chocolate eggs and bunnies are disappearing from the shelves in our supermarkets and although there may still be a few, half eaten, around our homes, pretty soon they will be gone too. And then there will be nothing but to look forward to next year, next Easter, and the next celebration of hope and new life.

I assume for most, if not all of us, Easter does not impact our day to day lives in a big way. For most of us they are just a couple of days on a high, where family gather and good meals are served and we bask in the warmth of being able to leave the worries of the world behind for a bit. If we can that is.

Some of us don't even get that. Easter or not, people die untimely deaths, relationships fall apart, a teenager is allowed to leave the mental health unit after attempted suicide and tries again within 24 hours. And those are only the things that I came across over the Easter weekend. You may know of, or have experienced, other things that cast a shadow over the halleluiahs of Easter.

So how in the world are we to maintain our high spirits, if we even got there, in a world like that? Isn't there enough contra evidence to tell us it's all make believe? The fantastical yarns of Galilean fishermen and hysterical women trying to give us hope in a world that clearly shows, at every turn, there is no hope? That death comes and wreaks havoc, scarring us for life every time we encounter it?

Thomas won't have a bar of it! "I'll believe it when I see it" seems a pretty safe way to respond to farfetched tales of resurrection. I'm not getting on that cloud, says Thomas, I might have to come off it again, and that will hurt me more than staying where I am, grieving, but with two feet firmly planted on the ground. Get over yourselves! Get over this ridiculous idea Jesus is not finished with the world yet. Go home, get real....

A couple of weeks later, and Peter has not gone home, and is still not over it. Thomas has joined him, as have many, many others.

Why don't you shut up? ask the authorities. You'll bring his blood upon us! Don't you remember what happened? What happens when you carry on like that, about resurrection, and new life, and God's Kingdom coming? You'll get crucified! We'll get crucified. Go home, get your boats geared up, your families will be glad to welcome you home.

Sorry, says Peter, that won't be possible I am afraid. We've tried to shut up, but we simply can't. There is something stronger than us inspiring us and urging us to speak. And it's working miracles.

We've discovered Jesus is more alive than ever before in our community. Mentioning his name is enough to bring healing, start people talking gibberish, and have people experience hope and inspiration beyond their

wildest imagination. It doesn't really matter how grey, or even black, you tell us the world looks. Or what may be threatening us. This light that's started shining in our lives just keeps spilling through the cracks!

So here we are. Two thousand years later. Because Thomas somehow had his mind changed. Because Peter and his friends just couldn't shut up about it, and worked a few miracles in the bargain. Because whatever the authorities did, however the established order tried to put them back in their boxes, the light kept spilling through the cracks.

Two thousand years later, and still people are touched, inspired, moved (literally), by a man who, for all accounts and purposes, should have become a distant memory long ago. Listening to some of the candidates applying for ministry at the presbytery formation committee this week I could not help but be impressed and over awed. It's still happening!

Are we, as North Balwyn Uniting Church in that category though?

I don't know about you, but I sometimes feel that we have come full circle. Huddling together anxiously, insecure and wondering what will happen next like the disciples immediately after the crucifixion. Suspecting death, finally, may be having its way, with our faith, our institution, our way of life. Some of us acting tough, like Thomas, ready to reconcile ourselves to the inevitable rise and demise of cultures and religions. Some responding like the authorities, the establishment of that distant day: Preserve what we can, stay as inconspicuous as we can, lest we make things worse. Safe in our own huddle of truth.

In our Church today there certainly doesn't seem to be much evidence of the fire in the belly Peter displayed and was locked up for. Not much chance of anybody locking us up for unseemly enthusiasm. Mostly we are deemed well meaning, harmless relics of a bygone age, that have become irrelevant over time. And we, perhaps with a sigh of resignation, find ourselves tidying up the Church, removing the decorations and going back to our normal, day to day routine.

Do we have a voice that demands to be heard? Are we working miracles? Is the experience of Jesus alive so strong in us that the light of them spills through into the world?

Or is that too much to ask after two thousand years?

There is evidence that it is not. That he is still around, touching people with his presence, working miracles, breaking bread, offering hope.

Even where the Church huddles together in anxiety and distress, doors closed, lights out, somehow, at times, still people are moved to open the doors, let the light in and start to talk gibberish about resurrection, and healing, about justice, and the Kingdom, about life and inspiration.

Will it happen here? It is. But it may be too frightening to admit to it. We may have to come out of "safe mode", even at this late stage of our lives. Dare to dream dreams, talk gibberish, work miracles, and go against what common sense and practical considerations would have us do: Stay put and keep quiet, huddled around a table in a back room, making sure we don't cause any offense to the neighbours.

The fellowship Church is a wonderful place to be. Warm, safe, and pretty harmless. We can all see our days out comfortably in it, look after each other, and stay with our age old customs and faith. Waiting for the day that Christ will come again and somehow liven up whatever is left of us. But not too soon. Things feel, after all, pretty good the way they are, and have been forever.

Gospel is, that uncomfortable as it may be, this is not an option. Christ is alive and seeks to enter our lives. And he won't be deterred by closed doors or ingrained beliefs and customs.

In this Church some young people are seeing visions and some old(er) people are dreaming dreams. Dreams and visions they find hard to stop talking about. Space for quiet contemplation, room for our children to grow up, gardens, coffee machines, herbal tea, new hymns and old psalms to publish, and large bequests to make it all possible to boot. It is all part of a growing understanding of what mission and outreach may look like for this Church at this time. Getting talented and experienced students joining us, being involved in new and exciting initiatives of the wider Church, a growing ministry to elderly people in the area, including a workshop that is already attracting significant support and involvement from outside the Church, our connections with initiatives like Bethel, Sunshine Mission, Balwyn High, primary schools in the area. Muffling any of that is muffling the voice of life and resurrection.

What is it to be? Is Christ among us or not? Is he alive and well, preached and practised and received with enthusiasm by his body, the Church? Or are we calling it a day, huddling together, holding on to what we know? Christ is not only knocking on our doors, he is letting himself in. It is up to us to respond when we recognise him and let ourselves be inspired into action. Amen.