

I am the resurrection and the life. A sermon
preached on Easter Sunday, March 27, 2016 at St.
Giles' Presbyterian Church, Prince George, BC by
Rev. Herb Hilder.

Lessons: JOB 19:23-27

I CORINTHIANS 15 (Phillips)

MARK 16:1-8

Every Easter Sunday we are confronted by a
story, a narrative that is beyond our immediate
understanding and comprehension

This is not because we are thick, slow or stupid
Nor is it owing to the doubts, fears, worries and
anxieties we all harbor.

The events of that first day of the week,
Just as the sun was rising and the dawn gave
Mary of Magdala,

Mary the mother of Jesus and Salome the
opportunity to gather up embalming spices to
embalm the body of Jesus

Confronted them as it confronts us with things
that defy a rational explanation!

They were the first witnesses to something
that in all their experience could not be,

Yet it was undeniably the case

The stone was rolled away

A young man of frightening majesty and beauty
an angelic being –a messenger of God – pointing

to where the body of Jesus had been placed on the Friday night and saying **He is not here, He has risen!**

Those words frighten the women even more than the dazzling presence of the Holy being.

It was too much

They could not comprehend what they had encountered

The women therefore dash away besides themselves with amazement and terror.

They ran away and at first said nothing to anybody for they were terrified.

Mark's Gospel – believed to be the first gospel written – concludes with those words.

The first reaction of the women then is dread.

Of course a part of them would have rejoiced in the hope that Jesus had risen,

But still more of them were stupefied, paralyzed with fear

Not fear, based on terror, threats or ugliness,

But fear born of an awareness that God's power, God's working, God's purposes, God's love was as Jesus in life had claimed it to be – bigger, more enduring than anything in the world in which they lived – even death itself.

So I think we need to see the events of that first Easter,

The reflective commentary by St. Paul in I Corinthians 15 on what the Resurrection of Jesus means for all people and for all time

As if we stand on holy ground!

Similar really to that of Moses when he stood before a bush that burned, yet, was not consumed by fire.

Easter confronts us then with a thin place experience – a very near to the Holy, to God experience that has no parallel in scripture
 If we are not prepared to see this is the case,
 Or try to see this as the case,
 Then Easter will continue to be only viewed as a sentimental occasion full of baby chicks, little bunnies delivering chocolate eggs
 And a time to mark the change of wardrobe!

That would be a tragedy,
 In which we are the losers – and it is so unnecessary for this to happen!

But as we open ourselves to the sense of awe, wonder and mystery that is clearly there with the events of that first Easter.

Our perspective and our perception changes

How so?

I think the *Resurrection changes our perspective on death.*

Rarely if ever, is it easy for any of us to accept that all living things – including ourselves – and those we love – will die

With Jesus' Resurrection, one of the boldest and most mysterious of all the I Am' claims that Jesus makes becomes undeniably true – true truth – that which is true for all people and for all time.

I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who believes in me will never die
[John 11:25-26]

This life, as rich and wonderful as it is is not all there is!

There is a life beyond this one for those who believe and hold to the promises of Jesus in faith and hope.

We are not given too many details about the nature of this life beyond death.

The closest we come is in Paul's magnificent chapter 15 of his first letter to the believers in Corinth

In this chapter, Paul seeks to use human language and phrasing to explain to the Corinthians what the Resurrection means for all people and for all time.

St. Paul uses phrases and illustrations related to the growing of seeds.

The final product of the seed which was initially planted in the ground bears little resemblance to the fully grown plant

When you sow a seed you do not sow the ‘body’ that will eventually be produced, but bare grain, of wheat, for example, or one of the other seeds.

We will be changed (I Cor. 15:51)

Declares St. Paul

Much more than that is speculation.

Not wrong to do, but speculation for its own sake can sometimes distract us from the main point==which is that there is life after this one This life is what C.S. Lewis once described as ‘shadows’ – reflections of a greater reality.

The hope held in faith to Jesus’s I AM, To Paul’s declaratory affirmations does not mean that the death of someone we knew and loved can be cavalierly dismissed owing to the promises of Jesus.

Too often, I have heard believers say to the grieving, that they should be happy their loved one has left to be with the Lord

Or that Jesus needed that person more than family members.

I wonder what sort of God we are proclaiming in saying such things.

If there was a way that grief could be fast-tracked without the high probability of such fast tracking causing physical, emotional, spiritual or social illness, I would welcome it

But grief will not be rushed

No one handles grief the same

Profound grief may be short term or long
 Those who have lost children or many who have
 lost spouses, siblings or very close friends know
 that the sense of sadness, loss and being bereft
 never completely disappears

Life does go on, but like Jacob at the Jabbok in the
 Genesis cycle of stories,

After wrestling with the angel through the night
 on the banks of the Jabbok, Jacob is crippled.

Grief is so much like that – we move forward, but
 often we have a psychological limp for the rest of
 our lives.

Often out of such limping, people seem to move
 in one or two general directions – empathy for
 others or bitterness to the world!

I truly appreciate the lines read earlier
 from the book of Job.

For this is so real life....

In the midst of great angst and why questions,
 Job is able to hold to the promise of God in
 control.

It does not remove him from the angst or the
 suffering as we know, but his declaration gives
 him and those who take great comfort in this
 brief bright ray of hope

**²⁵ For I know that my Redeemer^[a] lives,
 and that at the last he^[b] will stand upon the
 earth;^[c]**

**26 and after my skin has been thus destroyed,
 then in^[d] my flesh I shall see God,^[e]
 27 whom I shall see on my side,^[f]
 and my eyes shall behold, and not another.
 My heart faints within me!**

That affirmative pause is brief, but it is enough to help Job move forward – wounded, but walking.

Speaking personally, I think one of scriptures greatest gifts to us is to help give us perspective and hope.

I have officiated at over 200 funerals in my years as a parish minister.

It never gets easier by the way....

Early in my ministry I found myself officiating in under a month, the second funeral service from the same family.

It was December, and the first service was for one of the children who had taken his own life.

The second happened near the end of the month – a result of the mother having an unexpected brain aneurism from which she succumbed.

I felt profoundly inadequate to lead either service.

For I felt so much for them

What could I say?

Then I thought back on what I had been taught at Knox College by our worship professor – in funerals – read scripture, scripture, scripture.

I could say little as Herb Hilder,

But as a Christian, I could read the promises of God – for it is those that give hope, perspective and meaning to this life – especially at its most crushing and difficult times.

I therefore began both services with the I AM promise of Jesus.

I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die and will, and everyone who believes in me will never die
[John 11:25-26]

I like to believe that the scripture I read at those two services ,

And the scripture I read at every celebration of life services offered some element of hope.

For it remains that it is in following the One who makes those promises that all things are possible.

So, with the events of that first Easter,; our perspective on death and this life changes

:Our

necessity to grieve loss is acceptable, but it is not grief that is hopeless

Finally, this story reminds us, again as few other stories in scripture do *that there will forever be a major element of mystery in God's plans and purposes.*

I wonder whether the main reason many are uncomfortable with Easter in a way they are not with Christmas is that the mystery and wonder of Christmas surrounds the birth of a baby – a readily identifiable experience.

Whereas the mystery and wonder of Easter surrounds the raising of a man from the dead – clearly, not so readily identifiable to any of us.

I wonder whether Easter remains somewhat distant in the lives of so many are that the element of mystery in this life is just too uncomfortable.

We live in a world that dismisses so much mystery or tries to explain it away.

And yet, to accept mystery, as to accept awe and wonder – we open ourselves to see a more wondrous, rich and unique world around us.

Mystery, awe and wonder, allows us to look at the world in colour

Rationalization and dismissiveness about that which we cannot understand will over time only allow us to see the world in black and white or perhaps shades of grey.

How sad is that....

Now, if God were a malevolent, moody God, the reality of mystery surrounding him would indeed be terrifying.

But the God of the Bible, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is generous and giving.

His promises do not change. His love does not change

Certainly God expects us to face up to sin and failure, but he forgives,

If necessary time and again

We can therefore live by his graciousness, His grace – not by our little achievements.

In Easter we see the Divine Lover saying – there is no limit to which I will not go for you – in this life, in death and in what lies ahead.

do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here.

How then shall we live in the light of such a marvelous declaration?