



THE STONE ROLLED AWAY

A Easter Message from the Bishop of St Asaph
Maundy Thursday, 14th April, 2022.

When the Judean and Roman authorities set a seal on the stone securing the tomb of Jesus (Matthew 27.66), they must have felt the story was over. It was likely that the disciples thought the same thing. A troublesome prophet had made his bid for glory, entering Jerusalem in triumph, but now he had been arrested, tried, shown to be a fraud, executed and safely buried. It had happened before to Jewish rebel leaders, and that was that.

Yet the Christian claim is most astounding – on the third day he rose again. You can see the shock waves spreading out from the tomb. First, key disciples, who had intended to dress Jesus' body for burial, are recorded as finding the tomb empty, then Jesus starts appearing to his immediate circle, but very quickly the early Church is blessed with enthusiasm and power to begin witnessing to Jesus as the conqueror of death and evil. Far from being defeated, Christians said, Jesus is alive, the victor and the author of eternal life.

The shock waves have reverberated across the world and down through the ages. Enemies of Christianity have been converted, the most surprising people have done the most surprising things because they believe in the resurrection: standing up to tyrants though it meant their death; standing with the outsider though it meant ridicule; standing with the weakest and poorest and most ill in society, though it meant partaking in suffering.

And for over two billion people today, myself among them, the Resurrection, rooted in historical experience, has become continuing inspiration to faith, and love and service. Fundamentally, the Christian good news is that evil does not have the last word, death is not the end, suffering is not without redemption, and no good thing is ever lost with God.

I believe that this is a message of hope that the world needs to hear. We have fought and struggled with Covid, the resurrection promises us that there is life beyond the pandemic – even that our loved ones who have died are somehow safe in God's care. The horrors of war in Ukraine, and the dastardly deeds of warmongers are not the last word: there is the possibility of new life. War will end, regimes will collapse, new beginnings will come to pass.

Does this sound simplistic and is this hope the product of blind faith? Yes, it is my faith, it is my creed, but it is also my experience. I go back to the empty tomb in the Bible, and find it empty still. Christ is not there, he is risen. I see the lives of the apostles, Paul among them, transformed by God's love, and the Church springing into life, and this speaks to me of a real experience of the living God. I listen to the testimony of the saints, and of friends and family, and they seem to have experienced what I experience – a thousand everyday resurrections, that keep life and hope and love alive, even in the darkest of situations.

One of the greatest of modern Welsh poets, Dylan Thomas, encouraged us "Do not go gentle into that good night", and I suspect that for him, it was a war cry to live life to the full until its close. For me, however, the fact that the stone was rolled away tells me that night is never the end of the story, there will always be a morning.

The stones that can trap us in daily living, entombing us in disappointment, doubt, despair, or even spiritual death, are the stones that God's angel seeks to roll away for us, and Christ is the first-born from the dead, the One who promises us that death and evil never has the last word.

