

John Docherty, 2013-03-30

**” ... and the tomb was empty ... “
Easter 2013**

About 5 years ago I was asked to speak at Easter. At the time I confessed that while I recognise that Easter is the central event of Christianity, it's not my personal favourite when it comes to the Christian calendar – Christmas holds that spot for me.

I suggested this is so because Christmas is a more “human” event – it's about the birth of a child - and stirs, in me, feelings of warmth, and bonhomie, in a way that Easter never does, chocolate bunnies notwithstanding. I also suggested that the Easter resurrection, this rising of a man from the dead, is a more frightening event than the birth of a child at Christmas. It is so far outside our human experience that it should more naturally instil awe and terror than peace and jubilation. It's not “normal” for people to rise from the dead!!

I went on to explore some of the significance of this event, its inherent promise of salvation and victory over death, and finally homed in on the promise of eternal life as being as much a promise of a certain quality of life, as it was a promise of a certain quantity of life.

Today I want to approach Easter from a slightly different tack. I want to look at this empty tomb as being, first and foremost, a profoundly dull, “non-event”.

It didn't change the world overnight.

The people of Jerusalem, and those further afield in the Roman Empire, continued to eat, sleep, and live their lives very much as they did the day before Jesus' resurrection. There was no earth-shattering revelation of God's power that flipped the world on its head and made it impossible for the ordinary person to carry on as before.

The sun that rose on Easter morning (... S-U-N sun, not S-O-N son ...), was the same sun that rose on Good Friday when Jesus was crucified, and it was the same sun that has risen every day since. There is very little new under this sun, and even today, some 2000 years later, there are still empires. There is still corruption, war, famine, torture, hate, strife of every kind. And there is still suffering.

Why?

If Jesus came to fulfil the Law and the Prophets, show us how to live, and prove to humankind once and for all that “THIS” is the Way, why did this resurrection happen in the shadows, away from the crowds, in the silent loneliness of a cave in a hillside, with no-one to witness it but a couple of guards who respond by falling senseless?

Why wasn't Jesus clearer in his message that this event would happen? Why weren't there crowds of thousands gathering outside the tomb waiting for this magnificent display of power and glory?

Even his closest disciples were clued out. *They* hadn't understood his cryptic remarks about destroying the temple and rebuilding it in 3 days. *They* weren't sitting outside the tomb in anticipating of vindication and finally having the respect and status they expected.

No. They were huddled off in some corner somewhere, afraid for their lives and in abject terror that what had happened to Jesus on Friday, would happen to them next. Even when the women who had gone to the tomb to properly prepare Jesus' body for burial returned from the tomb to the eleven with news that Jesus had risen, Luke tells us “... these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.”

Who was in charge of public relations that day? Surely an event of this magnitude should have been played up to the max! Surely this was the perfect opportunity to attract the attention of everybody of note, gather together the faithful and the unbelievers alike (and maybe especially the unbelievers because this is your target market), show them what you're capable of, and continue on with a ministry that had already begun to sow the seeds of change.

What better way to prove your bona fides than to die on a cross in a horribly brutal way, let the powers that be think they've won, then blind-side them by rising again and moving on as if nothing had happened, proving to the entire world that you ARE the Son of God!

If this man can draw crowds of thousands by simply talking, and feeding them with a few loaves and fishes, what kind of a following can he draw once he's risen from the dead!? And how much good can be done once he's consolidated his power base!?

So, why? Why does God choose instead to have this happen out of sight, away from all eyes, even those of the closest disciples?

There seems to be a certain deliberate obscurantism in this style. Questions are bound to come up.

Did Jesus actually rise from the dead?

Was his body stolen away by someone with a particular agenda on either side of the politico-religious terrain?

Were his post-resurrection sightings real – or were they the products of overly active imaginations?

Certainly some of the sightings seem suspiciously ambiguous, where the participants don't at first recognise Jesus, then do at some point.

Why? Why doesn't God once and for all, lay all the questions to rest and show, unambiguously, that this is what has happened;

- that Jesus is the Way,
- that death has truly been conquered,
- that the promise of eternal life is not a carrot meant to distract us from the important issues of struggling to achieve justice and what is right, and living this life on this earth

We get a hint of an answer to all of this, earlier in Luke's gospel, in chapter 16, verses 19-31. ***Read the passage***

Now, let me repeat what I said 5 years ago at Easter – I don't believe our scriptures teach that there is a Hell of everlasting torment and physical suffering such as we are shown in this passage. I don't believe the passage is intended as a literal description of the afterlife, with flames licking at the damned and bliss for the righteous. It's a story, meant to convey a mental image and a lesson for the hearers.

The lesson here is not that bliss or torment awaits us – the lesson is that we already have a guide for life, in the Law and the Prophets, and that notwithstanding, we tend to hear what we want to hear, and see what we want to see. Even if someone were to return from the dead, most of us would remain unconvinced of the value of

this guide and would make our choices in life based on some other set of values.

Now, I don't know about you, but I think if *I* were confronted by someone who'd come back from the dead – I might give that person a fair bit of room to influence my thinking. I think I would reasonably assume that I had something to learn from this person. But maybe I'm special. Maybe I'm one of those who are inclined to hear and see the right things. Mind you, depending on who it was who returned from the dead, I might still filter what I heard a bit.

“Yeah, George was always a little on the narrow-minded side. Nothing new here.” I was careful to choose a name that I didn't think would be attached to a former MFMer.

But this is one of the terrifying elements of Jesus' resurrection.

We're expected to believe it happened. I don't mean we *have* to believe it happened – there are plenty of people who *don't* believe it happened. I mean we're given a choice, and are expected to make a leap of faith and embrace this event as actually having happened.

We're not given incontrovertible proof, any more than Jesus' contemporaries were given unanswerable proof of his resurrection.

We're not forced to look Jesus in the face and admit that he's alive.

There is no pilgrimage site we can visit where we can see Jesus sitting, and teaching, or giving communion.

Jesus doesn't have a Facebook page, or a Twitter account that he uses to keep in touch. He doesn't even have an email address.

He rose from the dead, and then, instead of sticking around and putting into place a proper structure to keep things in line, he takes off again.

And here's another terrifying aspect of his resurrection. He takes off, and leaves us behind. What are we to do?

He tells us over and over again that he hasn't come to abolish the Law and the Prophets, but at the same time, he tells us, or shows us, over and over again, explicitly or implicitly, that something has fundamentally changed.

It's no longer "an eye for an eye", but "love your enemy".

- man was not made for the Sabbath, but the Sabbath was made for man
- do not sin, but don't even think of casting stones at someone who does sin
- the meek will inherit the earth

But he doesn't stay to walk us through the implications of these things. What are we supposed to make of all this? The religious leaders have been written off. Jesus has made it abundantly clear that the institutions of the day have lost their moral authority. We're told that on Good Friday, when Jesus died on the cross, "... the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom ..." We're to understand from this that any artificial separation between us and God has now been removed, and we are called into God's presence.

By the way, we're also told that when Jesus died on the cross "... the earth shook, and the rocks were split; the tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised ..."

Now *that's* an event to draw attention.

Why didn't this happen at the resurrection?

But let me get back to the fact that Jesus has left us on our own. Of course, we know that ultimately we weren't left on our own – the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost. I'll leave the treatment of that event to Gary, on the May long weekend.

For now, let's just focus on the fact that Jesus has laid the groundwork for a new way of following God, then left us to it. But that's the curious and terrifying thing – he's left *us* to it.

Up to this point the people of God are living in a theocracy in which God speaks through the prophets, meets with the High Priest in the Holy of Holies in the temple, and there is a top-down hierarchy of ritual in which grace trickles down to the faithful.

To some extent it was a comfortable, predictable, reassuring structure that had its place. It protected the Law. It provided a sense of security, a sense of connectedness and belonging. It kept the worship of God alive.

And everything Jesus did threatened it.

His life threatened it.

His death threatened it.

And his resurrection threatened it.

Because from now on, this theocracy would no longer be top-down. This is now a from-the-bottom-up theocracy in which even the simplest of souls can dare believe he or she has the right to step into the Holy of Holies and meet God.

Now it's a very human social trait to want to avoid chaos and uncertainty, so we tend to prefer structure to anarchy. We like things to be clear, so we look to those who can provide us some direction. Christianity today has a multitude of structures, some of which have reproduced the very ritualistic top-down pattern of the pre-resurrection reality, in which religious leaders dictate how to understand God. And while I have difficulties with these structures, I have no problem with Christians who feel they can live faithful lives within those structures.

But our very natural desire for clarity can sometimes result in a very inflexible simplicity. We like *answers*.

Digestible answers.

Easy answers.

But Jesus doesn't quite offer us easy answers. He calls us to struggle with the complexities of life and offers us a Way to struggle.

This is certainly what the early anabaptists of the radical reformation believed.

They rejected the religious structures of their day and held to the belief that this book held all the guidance necessary for any Christian to hope to be acceptable to God. And they trusted in the idea that *together* we could make sense of this – that God would honour our search and provide the necessary guidance, at the appropriate time, through the appropriate means.

That God would honour our honest search for truth.

When Jesus walked out of that darkened tomb, and was greeted by deafening

silence rather than cheering crowds, he invited us to make a leap of faith and believe that the world is now a very different place.

He invited us to take up our part of the burden of making this world what it was meant to be.

He invited us to be attentive to the subtle ways in which God is intimately involved in our lives, in spite of the absence of earth-shattering dramatic punctuation.

A couple of weeks ago, I came across an African proverb that says the following :

“We can hear the walls that are falling.
Can we hear the grain that is growing?”

The crucifixion is the dramatic falling of the walls. The crash and noise and dust of crushed hopes and destroyed lives. The inescapable sign of failure and death.

The resurrection is the quiet, unprepossessing, insistence of the promise of life.

In the face of apparent failure.

In the absence of absolute proof that things will change.

It is the subtle yet unassailable declaration that death is not the final word on the matter.

It is the gentle call to a leap of faith that God is indeed here among us.

Are you ready to make that leap?