

## **SERMON FOR EASTER DAY 16.4.17**

### **ALL SAINTS CHURCH, BIRKENHEAD**

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“If, at mid-day, we either look down to the ground, or on the surrounding objects which lie open to our view, we think ourselves to have a very strong and piercing eyesight; but when we look up at the sun, and gaze at it unveiled, the sight which served us well for the earth, is instantly so dazzled and mystified by its brilliance, as to assist us to confess that our idea of earthly objects is mere dimness when applied to the sun.”

The Great Reformed Theologian John Calvin, in his monumental work “Institutes of the Christian Religion”, penned these words over 450 years ago. It is an analogy of light, one the light we see reflected on the earth by the sun’s rays, the other, the blinding, and awesome light when our eyes are fixed directly on the source, the sun itself.

Light is a strong biblical theme, the creation story of Genesis talk of God’s divine command “Let there be light and there was light” revealing light as God’s creative power. There was a flaming light that lead the Israelites through the wilderness and in to the Promised Land.

And for us on this Easter Morning, Matthew’s Gospel speaks of the imagery of light, culminating in the form of an Angel, “whose appearance was like lightning, and clothing white as snow”

But as we all know so well. In the two long days before the appearance of that angel, there was only darkness, darkness which had shrouded the hearts and minds of a group of fearful disciples, who had succumb to the shadows of disappointment and despair.

All that was left of their movement were two courageous women, who in the cover of early darkness, came to pay their respects to their dead leader. If you have ever been up at dawn you will know the stillness, the soft distant magenta of the suns early rays mixed with a pale dark sky give a mystical almost transcendent feel, matched with an often-eerie silence. This would have been the vision that the two Marys greeted on that lonely morning, before the sun had come to shine.

Such themes of darkness and loneliness are what we still experience ourselves. We may turn on our TV’s or radios to catch the news as we wake. A TV or radio that displays all the horrors of humanity, right in to our living rooms. We all know it well, the constant religious hatred, wars, greed of politicians, military coups; the list is endless and exhausting. And there is our own troubles, perhaps the pain of getting out of bed in the morning or the anxiety of a day filled with hardship.

It is like a thousand crucifixions, played out every morning, often slowly wearing us down until we feel nothing at all. We do try to offer remedies to these problems, often born from our own human potential, which is ever on the rise. Such things have offered positive outcomes for many oppressed in our society, but it is never enough. As can be

seen in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21st centuries like never before, human projects never fix the human condition, which will be forever feeding the roots of pride and greed.

Such human pride and greed is the reason Jesus ended up in that stone tomb, with his followers scattered and afraid. The Romans, who were the epitome of pride and greed in their time, had, with the cooperation of the very people who were to uphold religious and civil life did something that we have done over and over again: silenced the very thing they did not understand and were unable to contain.

However, as we know from history you cannot keep the light out forever, and like the movement of the day, the sun must always shine. For the women on that first Easter morning, the movement from night to dawn was not a subtle movement of light, but a flood lamp, switched on with instantaneous brightness.

Matthews account like no other hits home the point that there is no merely naturalistic way of speaking of the resurrection. This is not about human capacities or possibilities. It is wholly about God's capacity and determination. If goodness and mercy are to withstand the onslaught of religiously based self-righteousness and control, it is not because good people just keep trying harder. If death as a conclusion is to be conquered, it is not because goodness just naturally lives on; it is rather, because God redefines death and does something altogether new.

Angels in piercing light are an inevitable element of the resurrection narrative, because that is the only way Matthew can make clear that we are confronted with. God's possibilities and not our own. When I think of the resurrection, I am reminded of that analogy of John Calvin's that I begin with. Most of the time I see the world in ordinary light, but when I dwell on the significance that Jesus Christ was raised from the dead, I am staring full in to the blinding light of the sun.

Nevertheless, I cannot dwell there forever. The response to the enormity of the resurrection must be equally as earth shattering. As our three Archbishops wrote a few years ago in their Easter message: "The resurrection is the place in human history where evil, injustice, and prejudice are transfigured into goodness, justice and enlightenment. Christians receive this truth in a way that transforms the way we think and the way we live. This is what saves us."

It is not a salvation from an afterlife of punishment, but a loud speaker to the world, proclaiming there is a better way, right here and now. That the sun still shines. For the amazing thing about the sun is, although it appears to "rise" from the horizon, it is actually the Earth's motion, not the Sun's, that causes it to appear.

It is the same for us. We who represent the earth and more importantly the church must be the ones who produce this movement in order that the brightness of God's resurrection may shine forth, without that; it is like a world without a sun.

And this movement must not be purely individual, but must incorporate the whole of creation, in order that everything may be caught up in the miracle that is Easter, and that we may all together Arise from the darkness and in to the Dawn, to new life, new possibilities and a new world. As the English poet Henry Vaughan so eloquently put it:

Thou, whose sad heart, and weeping head lies low,

Whose cloudy breast cold damps invade

Who never feel'st the sun, nor smooth'st thy brow,

But sitt'st oppressed in the shade,

Awake, awake, and in his resurrection partake,

Who on this day,

Rose up, and cancelled two deaths due to thee

Awake, awake; and, like the sun, disperse

All mists that would usurp this day;

Where are thy palms, thy branches, and thy verse?

Hosanna! Hark, why dost thou stay? Arise! Arise!

And with his healing blood anoint thine eyes,

Thy inward eyes: his blood will cure thy mind,

Whose spittle only could restore the blind.