

Bishop Rachel's Easter Sunday Sermon, 2025



Easter Morning, 20 April 2025

Gloucester Cathedral

Readings: Acts 10:34-43 and John 20:1-18

This Lent I have been aware of times of feeling helpless – whether it has been watching scenes of people in Myanmar helplessly scrabbling with their hands to reach loved ones beneath earthquake rubble; or listening to President Trump's latest pronouncements; or news of the turbulence amid war in Ukraine, Sudan, the DRC ... – I feel so helpless.

When I awoke last Sunday to the news of the Israeli government attack on the Al Ahli hospital on Palm Sunday, I felt so helpless – and the possibility of peace in the Holy Land seems so hopeless.

And then came the tragic news of the sudden death of someone I knew and loved – someone who at times knew feelings of hopelessness – and the news evoked a sense of helplessness in me because there is nothing that I can do to change the reality of his death.

A couple of weeks before that, I was in a prison with a group of teenaged boys who have committed appalling and violent crimes, often on the spur of the moment, such that within minutes the lives and families of offenders, victims and communities have been devastated. And several of those boys face sentences for longer than they have even been alive.

The sense of those boys' helplessness to change the past, and seemingly even the future as their sentences stretch ahead, was palpable, as was their sense of hopelessness as they spoke about the present.

In all these things and more, 'hope' is a word that can run off the lips too easily.

I will never forget being in Bethlehem last year and a Christian pastor telling me that he very rarely uses the word hope because it sounds like optimism. To speak of hope when people feel oppressed and helpless in the face of power which seemingly seeks to destroy, seems cheap and easy.

Those feelings of helplessness and hopelessness are writ large in the events of that first Holy Week in Jerusalem over 2000 years ago:

As Jesus was brutally nailed to that cross – humiliated and unable to move and in excruciating pain – the sense of helplessness must have been profound. So too for family and friends as they stood at the foot of the cross, unable to change the situation. I cannot imagine the depths of pain and the flow of tears, and I can only assume that the sense of hopelessness was overwhelming. Here was the one who so recently had come into

Jerusalem proclaimed as King, with jubilant crowds feeling hopeful that at long last here was a leader – even the Messiah – who was going to rescue them from oppression and bring in a brighter future. Now all that has crumbled, and hope is shattered, and Jesus' followers are helpless as the nightmare unfolds at such speed.

I'm sure that every one of us, whatever our story, has had that experience of life suddenly changing, and fuelling our sense of helplessness and hopelessness. It's an all too regular occurrence in people's lives: The diagnosis, the accident, the sudden abandonment; the earthquake, the attack, the public revelation...

Of course, what is experienced as a sudden event has usually been growing for some time – beneath the surface, or within the body, or in the behind-the-scenes planning.

And here at the foot of the cross was a plan being realised, despite the sense of desolation and helplessness amid what seems such a sudden and unexpected turn of events.

God who has loved the world from the very beginning was revealing a plan of outrageous rescuing love which had been in the making from the beginning – a long-time plan for the destruction of evil; a plan to overcome the darkness, and defeat even death itself.

And so it is that we arrive at John's account of that first Easter morning. The helplessness has not shifted. Mary goes to the tomb because she can do no other even if it's not really going to change anything. Within minutes she is running to Simon Peter and John to tell them that Jesus' body has been removed – and there is an overwhelming sense of bewilderment and helplessness, and perhaps an even deeper sense of hopelessness. If it wasn't enough that Jesus' life had been taken from them, now his body has gone too.

After John and Peter have come and gone, Mary's helplessness leaves her weeping outside the tomb; and even when she sees angels it doesn't seem to make it any better. And then in her grief, confusion, helplessness and hopelessness, Jesus Christ speaks her name. Mary. Suddenly the hope floods in.

I wonder what went through Mary's mind as she clung on to Jesus Christ who miraculously had come back to life. I wonder if in just a few seconds she begins to imagine a new future and the way ahead. And is it surprising that she clings – clings on to let her helplessness and hopelessness be dismissed in a moment of holding something tangible, perhaps even a moment of feeling in control – clinging on with optimism about what could now be.

But hope is going to be differently shaped – God shaped – beyond-our-imagining shaped. And the risen Christ – the presence of God – pronounces a future bigger and more mysterious than words can explain which is coming towards us to meet us. Here is heaven touching earth and earth touching heaven. Here is the one who has come from God the Father and mysteriously is God, and in some incomprehensible way is returning to be with God the Father. Here is the Lord Jesus Christ – and Mary lets go and runs to share the amazing good news.

Returning to those words of that pastor in Bethlehem about the word 'hope' – In fact, what he said was that he could only use the word 'hope' in relation to Easter and on Easter day. There is no optimism for people in the Holy Land at present. There will be no optimism today in so many places of conflict, pain and injustice across our world. Today, the reality of what has happened in the lives of people who grieve or suffer – none of those situations have changed. **But there is hope. Nothing can undo the resurrection**, which mysteriously we enter into as followers of Jesus Christ.

On that first Easter morning, here is a hope which bears testimony to the living God who speaks people's names amid helplessness; A hope which bears testimony to Jesus Christ whose love offers forgiveness and mercy to all people. Peter who denied even knowing Jesus knew that (and we heard his bold words in our first reading from Acts).

Here is hope in a vastness of love which cannot be defeated, and Christ is still with us through the work of the Holy Spirit.

Those boys in that prison – I asked them what kept them going. For every one of them it was about a person who had not given up on them and who would speak with them and for them. Although none of them dared use the word love.

It is God's love which held Jesus Christ on the cross. The one who seemed helpless, was actually God, ensuring in sweat and blood and ultimate love, that hopelessness would change to hope. It is God's love which raised Jesus Christ from the dead.

The light of hope is able to mysteriously pierce the darkness – by a coffin or a bedside, or on a street or in a cell, because all the world's despair, pain and darkness will not have the final word.

I can't explain it – but I can receive it. And God knows your story, and speaks your name in love. And me and you – we are not helpless to respond.

Mary ran to tell the good news to the other disciples. Here is Mary, the first evangelist. And if we are followers of Jesus Christ, Easter people, then we too are called to bear witness to that hope. We cannot cling to optimism or how we want things to be, but we are called to speak and share the love and hope of Jesus Christ, not only present in our joy and laughter but also present in our pain and tears, and amid people's sense of helplessness and hopelessness.

Last night in this cathedral, we had a wonderful service of confirmation as the night descended and we celebrated Christ rising from the dead. Each of the confirmation candidates declared their faith and at the end of the service received a candle lit from the new Easter candle, reminding them that the light of Christ cannot be overcome by the world's darkness; and the candle is also to remind them to shine as a light in the world to the glory of God. May it be so for each of us.

Alleluia – Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia.

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