

## Easter 6, Matins, C: Matt 28.1-10, 16-20

For some unaccountable reason I'd like to preach today about uncertainty! But perhaps I oughtn't, as we're still caught in the headlights of resurrection. Resurrection is stamped through the final chapter of Matthew's Gospel, which we've just heard - a grand crescendo of commission, ending with words which sent generations of missionaries to the corners of the earth convinced that Christ's message had global significance, that it could transform the lives of individuals, societies and even nations:

*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.*

Christ gives a universal command to his followers – *all* nations need to know, and they need to know *everything* (or '*all*' – it's the same word in Greek) that Christ has commanded. And so *surely* we need strong and stable certainties to fuel this confident proclamation.

I've just returned from my old theological college, whose motto is St Paul's words, 'woe to me if I do not preach the gospel'. On the walls in one place are several wooden boards, each filled with columns of names, of those who gave their lives in mission overseas, year after year, going out to make disciples of all nations.

And yet I still somehow want to preach about uncertainty, not because I am fundamentally uncertain about Christ's commission, but because I am certain about the way the world is and how we need to be in it.

We could liken being in the world to climbing a ladder. Perhaps ideally, to get going and make progress in our lives, we'd like a lift – much more solid, with less effort required by us to go up - but a ladder is quite a rickety structure. It's more space than rung, and to climb it you have to spend time with one foot, then the other, dangling in the air. Most of us when confronted with a

ladder approach it with caution, with due respect for the gods of health and safety; and after a certain age, our ladder-climbing years are behind us and others must trim our high hedges and clean our windows for us.

Now I'm musing about uncertainty because of the weekend drama - the latest global crisis of confidence in the money markets and the national elections, each of which show that nothing can be taken for granted, and both of which hint that systems we had taken for granted are creaking under the strains of social and economic change.

How extraordinary to witness even the act of voting becoming problematic – a bunch of students turning up without their polling cards causing mayhem. Just like leaves on the line or the wrong sort of snow, they remind us how fragile our grip on control and predictability can be. We live in an uncertain world where collaboration rather than proclamation may not just be the best way but the only way to get things done, as our political leaders are discovering right now.

So how can resurrection and uncertainty go together? It has been done before ... and actually, it has been done from the beginning ...

Hear our gospel again: as the first day of the week is dawning – a new week, a new era - the two Marys are going to see a dead certainty, the tomb. Suddenly there is a great earthquake, and the angel of the Lord is descending from heaven, coming to roll back the stone from a place that was both sealed and defended.

Enough disruption and disorientation for you, yet?

The only thing that is settled is the angel, sitting on the stone, presiding over the chaos and looking like lightning and brilliant white. The guards are shaking and scared stiff and the women are no less terrified; so the angel says to them:

*'Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised'.*

They have to face not only the angel but the news that Christ is not where they expect to find him – they are being asked to re-imagine a crazy world where death, unlike taxes, is uncertain. They are told Jesus is going ahead of them to Galilee, but then suddenly he is there with them to greet them. No wonder they grab at his feet to steady their dizzy pre-conceptions.

Now I could go on, but the point is made – uncertainty, uncertainty, uncertainty – and worse still God's resurrection causing the uncertainty, and bringing terror and upset to his followers. What sort of a God, what sort of help is that? It's a strong cry, based on the feeling that if God is around he should be good and definitely on our side; or else, why bother?

But why believe in a God who acts rather like the teddies of our childhood - there to provide comfort in our fear and distress at the sheer magnitude of the world? There's a real difference between what is helpful and what is true; we can't judge everything by what immediately soothes us.

The world is a big place and deeply uncertain, and we have a choice to make about it – either this world is an accident, without God, and we must make our way in it alone (or with that nice Mr Dawkins), or it is with God. Its overwhelming complexity is not an accident but an expression of the power and wisdom of God, and we are in the company of the one who created, sustains and guides it to its consummation ahead of us.

The second option is the way of resurrection, as it has been from the beginning. The hope for the women lay not in what they could comprehend but in the presence of God irrupting on the scene. We are told that the earthquake was caused by the angel descending from heaven. Language couldn't convey more vividly the impact of God making himself present in

the world, in a way that stretched the very categories of human perception – the appearance of the angels was *like* lightning .. words fail the reality.

God's presence rumbles through this scene like thunder. After the angel, then the Lord himself, bodily present, greeting them and saying that the disciples should meet him in Galilee, then Jesus coming to them and commissioning the apostles, with a final pledge of his presence: 'I am with you always, to the end of time'.

So resurrection means uncertainty, but it also guarantees God's presence. Without resurrection, no new era, no earthquake, no angel, no terror, no appearance: with resurrection, presence can happen in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye. God comes astride the chaos: as we sing, 'His chariots of wrath the deep thunderclouds form and dark is His path on the wings of the storm'.

This is all very poetic, but what does it mean in plain english? It means, simply, trust; trust in this time of national and global uncertainty that God is at work in the thick of it; even that God is stirring the pot creatively. Isn't this what politicians are now daring to say together after the heat of the election, that there really is something broken in our society and electoral system which does need rethinking and reform; that the chaos, however unpleasant and disconcerting, holds within it the promise of change and hope?

And for us individually in the uncertainties of our own lives there is an invitation to believe in and spread the good news that Christ is with us. That he is not dead and behind us, but alive and before us; not on-hand like a bag of peas in the freezer, or a corpse in the tomb, but always ahead of us - as the one who comes to us, greets and commissions us, to get out there and meet him where he's going – to all nations.

The story says, *'they left the tomb quickly with fear and a great joy and ran to tell the others'*; and so should we. Christ is risen - abroad in the world that he's shaken out of sleep; so that whatever the uncertainty, we are never without him. He is with us, to the end of the age; and he comes to us now as we set before him the tangled threads of his creation.