

CAN YOU BELIEVE IT?

(Mark 16.1-14 and 1 Corinthians 15.1-11)

We've been through the rigours of Lent, we've shared the bitter sweetness of Palm Sunday, we've tried to take in the unspeakable, terrible events of Holy Week. But now, it's Easter Day! Can you believe it? Does the story of Jesus' resurrection thrill and excite you?

Excitement! The fairly new vicar had joined his congregation for coffee after the service when a very determined looking woman approached him. She was obviously not pleased: *Vicar, after hearing what you said at the PCC, I was hoping that your sermons would excite the congregation!* The vicar replied *You're right. I did say I would excite the congregation, but I did not say I could raise them from the dead!*

That red-top rag, *The Scroll* had a typical headline – there it is - YOU SEEN ANYBODY ROUND HERE? Could have been the Sun – nothing changes, does it!

But, does the story of Jesus' resurrection thrill and excite you? The three women in our passage from Mark's gospel were not thrilled, nor were they excited. If you want to look at it with me, it's on page 1024 of your bibles.

The three women had been there at the cross and had seen Jesus die. They had seen him taken down, carried away to be buried and placed in a rock tomb. They had seen too the huge stone which took four burly men to roll across the entrance. They wanted to do right by Jesus and place spices in his tomb but it was too late to do that straightway because by then the Sabbath had started. So they had to wait until dawn on the following day.

Picture them in the half-light with their bunches and bags of spices. Can you hear them? *How will we be able to get in? We'll never be able to move that huge stone. Maybe there'll be a few men around who will help.* They reach the tomb and, to their astonishment, the stone no longer covered the entrance. Someone had pushed it to one side. Sighs of relief all round!

In they go, into the semi-darkness, peering round to see where the body was. Then ...they start back, terrified as they see a figure in white standing out against the gloom.

I know who you are looking for; but Jesus is risen – if you don't believe me, look around. He isn't here. Now, I want you to tell Peter and the rest, that they, and you, will find Jesus in Galilee.

And do they go off to the disciples? No way! They are so scared and baffled that they run away.

Now, if one thing is absolutely clear from that story, it is that the last thing those women expected was to find Jesus not in that tomb and the second last thing they expected, was to be told by an apparition in white that, not only was Jesus not there, but that he had risen from death. Could they believe it? No, they could not!

The other gospels differ in their narratives about the discovery of the resurrection.

Luke has the women coming with their spices and finding the stone rolled away and the tomb empty. Luke uses the words: *While they were wondering about this*. What they saw was obviously not what they expected. Then they were scared stiff by seeing two men in fluorescent white who explain that Jesus has risen as promised.

Only then, only then, do they remember what Jesus said about his resurrection. But then what do we find? They dash off to tell the disciples who say they are talking nonsense. Peter goes to have a look for himself. Does he then believe that Jesus has risen? No, he doesn't! We are told *He went away wondering to himself what had happened*.

John has Mary Magdalen telling Peter and John *They have taken him away and I don't know where they have put him*. Peter gets to the tomb before John but again he doesn't get it. It is only when John gets there that we are told *He saw and believed*. The next verse in that story is in brackets – *(They still did not understand that Jesus had to rise from the dead)*.

Matthew tells us baldly that *Mary Magdalen and the other Mary went to look at the tomb*. Simply that – not to check whether Jesus had risen – just to look at the tomb. There was no belief on their part that Jesus would be alive again.

Despite what Jesus had told them more than once, none of them - not one of them - believed that he would come back from death.

So why should you and I?

Let's leave aside the bible assertions that his close friends met him, saw him eat, talked with him. Let's leave aside that Stephen, and others after him, were killed because they were convinced about the resurrection.

Let's leave aside Paul's assertion in our reading from 1 Corinthians about 500 plus people at having seen him at one and the same time.

Many people far more clever than me and, I dare say, any of you, have sought to prove that the resurrection was a myth or something put about by Jesus followers to justify their belief. In his new book (and it's well worth reading) John Lambert tells of eminent and learned people throughout the ages who set out to prove that Jesus' resurrection simply could not have happened - and did not happen.

You don't have to be a lawyer to know that in criminal cases the prosecution has to prove BEYOND REASONABLE DOUBT that the accused is guilty. In the 1930s a lawyer - John calls him a journalist but I am sure he was a lawyer - writing as Frank Morison, set out to prove BEYOND REASONABLE DOUBT that Jesus did not rise from the dead. He ended up being convinced BEYOND ALL REASONABLE DOUBT that that is exactly what happened and you can read how he came to that conclusion in his book *Who rolled away the stone?*

But Does it matter? It certainly did to St. Paul. After going through the arguments in favour of the resurrection in the passage from 1 Cor. 15 which Chris Brown read to us, Paul says this at v.17 *if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.*

Let's come to modern times and a professor of theology, Paul Little. His take is this: *Either [Jesus] did or he didn't rise from the dead. If he did, it was the most sensational event in all of history. If Christ rose, we know with certainty that God exists, what he is like and how we may know Him in personal experience; the universe takes on meaning and purpose.*

If Jesus' resurrection did not happen, all that went before, the nativity, the preaching, the healing, the miracles, the last supper, the betrayal, the trial, the cross - are absolutely irrelevant - matterless!

None of the people who first came to Jesus' tomb and found it empty could believe that he had actually risen - not Mary Magdalene, not the other Mary, not even Peter! Can you believe it? Can YOU believe it?

It's Easter Day. Are we thrilled and excited? How can we not be? It's all true – Jesus is alive!

After we have shared the peace of the risen Jesus we will be singing the hymn / *know that my redeemer lives*. The words were written over 200 years ago as a declaration of the certainty and effect of the resurrection. Let me quote some of the words:

I know that my redeemer lives!
He lives, he lives, who once was dead;
He lives, my everlasting head!

He lives, all glory to his name;
He lives, my Saviour, still the same;
What joy the blest assurance gives!
I know that my redeemer lives!

Can you believe it? If you can, sing it with all your heart and mind and soul – with every fibre of your being!