

EASTER SATURDAY BAPTISM

(1 Corinthians 14.1-4)

Introduction

On Sunday 26 November 1922, the British archaeologist Howard Carter found the entrance to an ancient burial chamber. With a trembling hand, he made a breach in the doorway with his chisel, and peered in aided by the light of a candle.

"As my eyes grew accustomed to the light," he later said, "details of the room within emerged slowly." He gazed in astonishment at piles of treasures; what he later described as "strange animals, statues, and gold - everywhere the glint of gold."

Lord Carnarvon, who had been funding his research for nearly a decade, called out from the top of the steps leading down to the tomb. "Can you see anything?" he said. And Carter shouted back in a voice cracking with emotion, "Yes," he said, "wonderful things!"

It took him ten years to catalogue all 5,398 items found in that tomb, of course as we know, of the boy Pharaoh Tutankhamun. It remains to this day the greatest ever discovery in all Egyptology. It will probably never be surpassed. Carter went on to write about his discoveries with these words; "It was the day of days, the most wonderful that I have ever lived through."

Another Sunday, as far as we can work out the dates, we're not sure but it was probably 5 April 33AD, three women peer into another tomb in the Middle-East. And what do they see? Wonderful things! Truly wonderful things! It would become for them the day of days, the most wonderful that they had ever lived through.

Because as they squinted into that tomb, hollowed out of the rock, they didn't see gold or jewels or ebony; or any exquisite, dazzling, priceless

sarcophagus, or treasures of any kind. All they saw that morning was a discarded, burial shroud left lying on a stone slab in a vacant cave.

They didn't realise the full significance at the time, how could they?, but it means the most momentous event in world history had just taken place. It means he's got the whole world in his hands.

And I want us to focus on those hands just for a moment.

- those hands that wiped sweat off his brow in the carpenter's workshop where he grew up
- those hands that opened blind eyes with a single touch
- those hands that wrote in the dust before discharging a sinful woman and absolving her of guilt
- those hands that received and blessed the children like Alfie today who came to him
- those hands that cleansed untouchables with a touch, so tender, so compassionate
- those hands that broke bread and lifted the cup at the last supper
- those hands that carried the cross to his place of execution
- those hands that curled up in agony as they were smashed against the coarse wood of his cross
- those hands that held to his lips the cup of suffering before he drank it dry
- those hands that hung limp and lifeless as he was lifted down dead from the cross
- those hands that turned stone cold in the cool of the tomb...

But the grave couldn't handle him and death couldn't hold him.

Because there in that tomb, all of a sudden his wrists begin to tingle, and his fingers begin to wiggle, and his hands begin to move, and his arms begin to stretch - and those hands throw off his burial shroud and push him up from the slab, he shoves the one-and-a-half ton stone out his way and those hands are now on his hips, as out from the grave he strides, victorious over death forever!

That's the day of days! That's the most wonderful day that this world has ever lived through.

Between Good Friday and Easter Sunday

We know where Jesus was at the moment of his arrest - in the Garden of Gethsemane, several hundred metres from Jerusalem's city walls. We know where he was at the moment of his resurrection three days later - in another garden; this time a memorial garden close to where he was crucified. But where was Jesus on Saturday?

This is the question a Bishop asked a class of sixth formers in Sheffield about 10 years ago. "Where do you think Jesus was between Good Friday and Easter Sunday?" Dead silence... And then a sixteen year-old girl raised her hand and gave this reply. "I don't know exactly, but I wonder if he was in hell, looking for Judas his lost friend?"

Well the Bible doesn't exactly put it that way.

But I do think that young lady's reply shows an understanding of how wide and high and low and deep the love of Jesus is. Alfie need never feel alone in life because God loves him and even if Alfie lets him go, he will never let Alfie go.

There's a scene in the film Troy where the armies of Greece and Thessaly are lined up against each other, ready for battle. And they come to an agreement. They decide that, to save massive bloodshed, each army should select a champion, a bit like David and Goliath, and they would fight it out between them and the victory would go to the army of the victor.

The Thessalians select a brute of a man called Boagrius. What a specimen! He's about 7 foot tall, shaven headed, eyebrows joining together, all muscle, he's an absolute beast. I hope Alfie never looks like him! And he strides forward with a mean frown on his forehead and a snarling mouth.

Then the Greeks bring out their champion; Achilles. It looks like a mismatch. Achilles is muscular and fleet-footed by most people's standards but Boagrius is a monster. Everyone watches with baited breath. They advance towards each other.

Boagrius takes a great javelin and hurls it at Achilles. Achilles raises his great circular shield and just fends it off like it is some kind of insult and he continues to stride forward, completely fearless.

Boagrius seems to find it amusing though and he hurls another spear. The same thing happens; Achilles just swats it away. Then, as Achilles approaches, out comes Boagrius' huge flashing sword but it is scarcely out of the scabbard before Achilles has athletically leapt towards him and he dispatches him in one move. Boagrius drops to the dust face first and with a mighty cheer the day goes to the Greeks. What a scene!

Then Achilles, unflinching, strides out towards the Thessalian army all lined up in rank and he looks up and down, and left and right, and he shouts out "Is there anyone else?" And everyone steps back. "Not me, definitely not me. Maybe him..."

Between Good Friday and Easter Sunday Jesus descended to the place of the dead. He had taken an absolute battering at the cross. It was brutal. It was carnage. He got the full force of human wickedness, he took a complete hammering – literally - they smashed the loveliest life ever lived against the cross of shame.

But between Good Friday and Easter Sunday Jesus faced off all the powers of hell and said "Is that all you've got? Is there no one else? Does no one else want to have a go?" Is there no other challenger? Is there no other adversary?

There was no one else! All the powers of evil cringed and shrunk off into the shadows of hell. Sin and death, like rats on a sinking ship, panicked and ran. Everything that opposes love and truth cowered and recoiled. And when he'd seen them off, as the old hymn says, "up from the grave he rose with a mighty triumph over his foes."

Jesus rose from the dead. And the resurrection of Jesus authenticates, validates everything he said and did. If Jesus did not rise from the dead, you don't need to take any notice of what he said. It's of no consequence.

But he said he was going up to Jerusalem - and he went. He said he would be mocked, beaten, spat on and handed over - and he was. He said they would crucify him - and they did. He said after three days he would rise again - and up from the grave he rose.

People say, "Yeah, but what about other religions? What about other philosophies?" The evangelist J. John puts it this way; "You're walking down a street and it branches in two, and you don't know which way to go... there are two men lying there; one's dead and one's alive. Which one would you ask for directions?"

Jesus is alive. He alone brings real forgiveness today, true freedom, deep healing today, new life, fresh hope and a bright future today to all who come to him in faith.

Let's pray...