

SERMON – 20/4/25

"The apostles thought that what the women said was nonsense, and they did not believe them." (Luke 24:11)

If you do an internet search for images associated with Easter, the first results that are returned are pictures of rabbits and then eggs, both painted ones and chocolates ones. As I mentioned earlier, eggs have long been a symbol of Easter because they remind us of the stone that was rolled away from Christ's tomb and they speak of new life. But rabbits?! How on earth did they come to be the thing that most people in our society associate with Easter? (Sure enough, when I went to visit my mother this week the front door of her care home is festooned with a giant cartoon character of a rabbit). Happy Easter, the world proclaims. But what kind of an Easter? Google images even offers us a rabbit hatching out of a chocolate egg. No wonder people are confused about the Christian message if that's what they think Easter is about! You have to scroll a long way down Google Images before you find a cross or an empty tomb.

What kind of words do you think people on the streets of our community would associate with Easter? If we went and did a survey down the High Street after the service, I guess we would be offered suggestions like: eggs, spring, chicks, chocolate, life, bunny, holiday.

But we're not out on the street – we're in Church and I'm guessing that we've not come this morning with rabbits uppermost in our minds because we want to celebrate Easter as a Christian festival. So what words would people here this morning associate with Easter I wonder? I would expect you to suggest things like: joy, glory, risen, hallelujah, life, victory, triumph, Gospel, alive.

But if we open our Bible as we have done this morning those are actually not the dominant words at least on the first Easter morning. Let me offer you three Easter words from our Gospel reading this morning – they are: puzzled, fear, and nonsense. And if you compare the other Gospel accounts as well you will find that there are similar expressions in all of them. The first Easter morning was *not* a time when joy and glory were being

experienced and where people were singing Hallelujahs, convinced of the victory that had been won by Jesus over the grave.

We read about the women coming at first light on the Sunday morning to do what they had been waiting to do during the long hours of the Sabbath. But as they got to the grave, they were puzzled as to who had rolled the stone away and puzzled as to where Jesus body had gone.

There was the same kind of puzzlement later that evening on the road to Emmaus when Cleopas and his companion were trying to work out what to think, and the following week when Thomas was told by his fellow disciples that they had seen the Lord. He couldn't get his mind round it and like many of us since he had questions that needed to be answered before he could be sure enough to believe what others were telling him.

If you are sitting here this morning feeling puzzled about the Easter story, then you're in good company. Easter is puzzling.

The second emotion that we read about in this morning's passage was fear. The women were frightened at seeing angels appear in front of them in bright shining clothes. But they were also fearful of what it all might mean if it was indeed true what had happened – sure, Jesus had spoken about being raised again to life on the third day but what could that possibly mean? It was too scary to think about. In John's Gospel, we are told that Mary comes face to face with the risen Jesus Himself – just think how terrifying that must have been, because she had seen Him die on the cross with her own eyes and she had watched as His body had been taken, wrapped in linen clothes and put in the tomb, yet here He was standing right in front of her speaking to her.

If you find yourself this morning overcome by fear or anxiety whether about the significance of the resurrection or indeed about anything else, then again you have actually come to the very heart of the Easter experience. Easter can actually be frightening.

Our final word is the word 'nonsense.' The women who had first seen the empty tomb went to give the message to the apostles, but they were met with disbelief and dismissal. That's nonsense they said – you can imagine the big gruff Galilean fishermen not having much time for these womenfolk who it seemed had got themselves all worked up over something for which there was

bound to be a logical explanation. And if the resurrection was dismissed as nonsense at first even amongst the apostles, there was more to come. The message of the cross was (and still is) widely dismissed as utter foolishness and weakness. In our day, the whole Gospel is widely side-lined as an irrelevance, leaving many Christians wondering if we *are* in fact just deluded to be setting so much store by something the majority think is just ridiculous and making spiritual seekers think twice about considering the claims of Christ.

Perhaps you are sitting here this morning looking in from the outside and feeling very sceptical about the Easter message altogether, or maybe you are a lifelong believer wondering if in fact Christianity has had its day and should be left behind. Again, if that's you, you are not alone this Easter. In human terms the message we celebrate with hundreds of millions of people the world over is the very definition of non-sense.

As our reading draws to a close we read: "Peter got up and ran to the tomb; he bent down and saw the grave cloths but nothing else. Then he went back home amazed at what had happened." (v.12)

Peter had been among those who thought the women were talking nonsense; he was probably just as frightened as the rest of them at the whole situation they found themselves in, and he was certainly puzzled, struggling to get it all straight in his mind. But here we find him going to examine the evidence for himself and we're told that when he saw the linen grave clothes but nothing else he was amazed. He might have remained puzzled and fearful but now he knew it wasn't nonsense.

Let me invite all of you this Easter to put the rabbits and the chicks and the eggs to one side. Tease out the strands of the puzzling story at the heart of the Christian faith and face your questions head on; ask God to draw near to you in whatever makes you fearful; and take a good look for yourself at the evidence for Christ's resurrection. Is it just nonsense that belongs with rabbits hatching from chocolate eggs or is it the most important message that anyone can ever hear?

I know where I stand which is why I rejoice to proclaim: Christ is risen. **He is risen indeed!**