

Matthew 28:1-10

A seismic event: Christ is risen!

Some of you may know Jim who sells the Big Issue at the Market. He used to call: “Get your latest copy of the Big Issue – only three dollars!” This was his invitation to read the alternative news, delivered from the hands of the forgotten people, on their behalf.

From tonight our cry is: Christ is risen! The three words of the Easter message are older than the Gospel narratives, and they are the source of the alternative news, which we celebrate tonight. And yet nowhere in the New Testament do we find a description of the Resurrection itself.

It is impossible to get behind the biblical material to provable facts. And if we could, the Gospel writers knew that it is possible to experience the fact, but not to come to embrace the faith of the disciples. The guards at the tomb were like that. They saw the event were filled with paralysing fear and became paid promoters of a story about body snatching.

It is ironic, and meaningful, that what the New Testament writers speak about is always out of reach.

The Resurrection narratives are not history, or science, or biography. They are preaching, which declares a conviction: a truth about life. They invite us to enter into that truth, which is based on a relationship of trust in Jesus. They want us to understand Jesus’ resurrection to new life was testimony that he who had been rejected and crucified by us was found to have been vindicated by God. Once understood, this news has transformative power.

In Matthew’s narrative the first day of the week was dawning. This is an allusion to the first day of Creation and the darkness, symbol of unfaith, was slowly turning to light. A new act of creativity was about to emerge.

The seismic events that follow: the earthquake, the angel as brilliant as lightning, the rolling away of the stone, all point to an apocalyptic, cosmic event. The earth was shaken, the world was changed and a new order was breaking in.

The resurrection of Jesus is central to all this activity. But this is not the restoration to life we saw in Lazarus, who was bound to die again. Matthew is pointing to a new act of creation in which Jesus is lifted up beyond the dominion of death. Jesus was understood to have been raised in glory, to the presence of God, and to have entered into a new, deathless life. This notion relates to what was known in Jewish literature about resurrection, but goes beyond it. It is invariably associated with the dawn of the coming of the Kingdom of God, the end time of Jewish expectation.

Matthew is clear that God has said YES to Jesus, and has made him part of the powers of creation itself. That is why, at the end of this Chapter Jesus says: “All authority has been given to me”, and “I am with you always to the end of the age.”

The angel and Jesus tell the women to tell the disciples, his brothers, to meet Jesus in Galilee. Even in their grief and alienation he names them as his friends, and calls them to the place of his ministry. He wants them to join him in making God present there as he did previously: in his presence, in his words, in his communion with sinners, and in his touch.

At the end of this chapter Galilee becomes a launching pad for a mission to the uttermost parts of the earth. And we are called, as his disciples were, to follow him into new pathways of life and service in his name.

Often at this time of year we see the media try and debunk this story of resurrection by reworking one of the several theories that have been floating around since the days of the soldiers and the high priests. What they are unable to do is to prove or disprove the truth of what the Gospel says or to assimilate what sort of news this is that is still being argued about 2000 years later.

But resurrection is not just another good idea of ours, or a belief in the present strengths and capacities of the church. That Jesus is not here, but has gone on before us into Galilee means he is not confined to anything we know. And he has gone before us into life. That is where the joy of Easter comes from. And there is further joy to be found in accepting his challenge to go and find him. Then we will know for ourselves what it means to share the alternative news about Easter. The gift of knowing: Christ is risen!