

**Easter Day**  
**16/4/2017**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Psalm 118**  
**Matthew 28:1-10**

### **The continuing presence of the crucified Lord**

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If there *is* a day in the Christian calendar on which it is especially appropriate to speak about the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth from the dead, then Easter Day is *not* that day. So, even though I'm about to preach on the resurrection, it's not because it's Easter(!)

Leaving preaching on the resurrection especially to this day only gives the impression that it is just one of the many things which Christians have to believe – like an item on a religious list. Yet our church year almost forces this problem upon us, and we could also say the same about the other major Christian festivals. Talking about the incarnation at Christmas time, talking about the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, or talking about the Trinity on Trinity Sunday – treating such things on those special days gives the impression that the Trinity is one thing we believe, and the giving of the Holy Spirit another thing, and the coming of God in Jesus at Christmas another. In fact *each* Sunday is a coming together to celebrate Easter, Pentecost, the Trinity and Christmas. *Each* Sunday's gathering of the Christian church is made possible by the Trinitarian God, once incarnate by the power of the Spirit in the Son Jesus, this risen Jesus being now present in his Spirit, to the glory of the Father.

Yearly celebrations have something to do with the way we mark time, and that has to do *not* with the special events themselves, but with the natural seasons. For thousands of years we've noted the coming each year of the spring sunshine and rains, the ripening of fruit and vegetable in summer, and then prepared ourselves for the winter again, before celebrating again the coming of another spring. Within that cycle of seasons and moons we've also learned to place other special events. We remember that a certain number of days or moon cycles after the longest or shortest day of the year someone was born or died, or some other special event happened. And we count the same number of days in the next cycle to remember it. When it comes to the church's festivals, the fact that we count 365 days from Christmas to Christmas has nothing to do with *Christmas* and what it means, but everything to do with the fact that that's just how long it takes for the earth to get back to the same hot spot (or cold spot, in the North!) each year. Easter, of course, jumps around a bit each year, but the principle is pretty much the same – counting cycles which have nothing to do with the meaning of Good Friday or Easter themselves.

This works very well for natural, seasonal cycles and events but not so well for the historical events the church recalls. With the cycle of the seasons, what we remember is always coming back within the next year, precisely because it is a cycle. Particular, historical events, however, get more distant with each cycle. While Christmas and Easter always come around again as *celebrations*, the source gets more distant from us. The celebration, then, quickly becomes an experience of looking *backwards*.

Treating Easter and the other Christian festivals as a “remembering” gives the sense that all that seems to matter is what happened “long ago”. It is scarcely ever *said* that way, but we *sense* it. We indicate that this is what we really believe when, at Easter, when we find ourselves asking, “*Did* Jesus really rise?” “*Were* the disciples really not mistaken or deluded?” When we find that we can really only use the past tense for God's actions,

we've thrown God and the reasons for believing in God into a distant past – a strange place, another country where they do things differently. Easter (and the other festivals) then becomes a mere *commemoration*. We *remember* the death and resurrection of Jesus, or remember his birth or the giving of the Holy Spirit to the church. And then, a day or so later, we get on the real business of living. How long does Christmas last, before we're back into the normalities of living? These great moments all fall from our consciousness so quickly because we're really just *remembering*, and life is too full here and now to spend back there in the past. Yearly celebrations of Easter and the other Christian festivals have ended up like all our other celebrations – *memorials*. And so talk of such things as resurrection or incarnation make little sense to us.

But when the church speaks about the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, we speak not about something which happened a long time ago, and which we desperately want somehow to drag into the present. The church's faith is not in some *event* many years ago, but *in the continuing presence* of the risen Lord.

Yet even this is perhaps not clear enough. We might say more strongly, the church believes in the continuing presence of the *crucified* Lord. If we cannot properly deal with Good Friday without reference to Easter, neither does Easter leave Good Friday behind. It is crucial that the risen one is the crucified one, else the crucifixion is meaningless.

To say that the *crucified* one is Lord is to say that this one rejected *is* raised from the dead, for a dead Lord is lord of nothing. If Jesus is in any sense "lord", then we are in the realm of some kind of resurrection. This "some kind of" resurrection, and that it is the resurrection of the crucified Jesus, is laid before us in our weekly gathering around the table for the Communion. The continuing presence of the crucified Jesus is as real and tangible as our breaking and taking of bread.

In this Communion is the body of Christ given and created. The body of Christ is *given* in the elements of bread and wine, tokens of Christ's body and blood, broken by the weight of human sin, driven to the cross by our rejection of God's freedom in our midst. The body of Christ is *created* in our gathering and reception of the crucified Jesus as *Lord*, as the source of life, as food and drink. In the resurrection stories crucified Jesus receives those who abandoned him. As we eat and drink he receives us and we receive him: we receive what we are, we become what we receive, the body of Christ, *risen now in our midst*. The bread and the wine *are* the body and blood of Jesus – in the strongest theological sense – to the extent that the community which receives them becomes the re-created body of Christ, risen.

Now, there is a lot in these dense little declarations, and it might seem that we've wandered a long way from where I began – the problem which our annual celebration of Easter creates for our understanding of the resurrection of Jesus. We might gather these themes together this way:

The word of the angel to those women at the tomb was, He is not here where you think he ought to be; he is risen and indeed goes ahead of you to Galilee. The word of the angel to us *today* is, He is not *back there* where you think he can *only* be, evermore distant with each Easter celebration. He is *risen*; and, indeed, goes ahead of you. There you will see him. He will meet you wherever you mark him as crucified *and* as Lord, as Lord *and* as crucified.

Our annual celebration of Easter does not locate Jesus in time for us – an ever increasingly distant time. To imagine that the church’s confession of the resurrection concerns something which happened to happen a long time ago is to have lost a grip on our language and practice. Easter celebrations remind us who Jesus is, and why we use the language we use and do the things we do: Lord, crucified, risen, breaking bread. We cannot declare “Jesus is Lord” if we trip over the language of resurrection; they are the same thing; a dead Lord is lord of nothing. We cannot declare that the church is the body of Christ but trip over the declaration that *the bread and wine* are the body and blood of that Christ. The bread is not the bread of life nor the cup the cup of salvation if they do not communicate to us that Jesus’ body was broken and blood spilled by us, and yet that he was restored by God and is returned to restore us, so that all which was his – body and spirit – might become ours. This is the “some kind of” resurrection of Christian confession: Christ is risen wherever the crucified one is received as Lord.

Again, the word of the tomb-side angel to us today is, He is not *back there* where you think he can *only* be, evermore distant with each Easter celebration. He is *risen*; and, indeed, goes ahead of you. There you will see him. He will meet you wherever you mark him as crucified *and* as Lord, as Lord *and* as crucified: rejected, but now restored and *restoring*.

As yesterday, so today and forever, he moves on ahead of us, calling us to meet him in an ever-new place. Resurrection faith hears that call and steps forth in joy.

Let that faith be ours, by the grace of God. Amen.

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