

Sermon – Easter Day – St Luke and St Matthew Brooklyn

John 20: 1-18

Alleluia, the Lord is Risen!

The joy of Easter is upon us my friends and the richness of the Easter story, of the release of Jesus the Christ from the bondage of death, fills our hearts with hope. The disciples of Jesus and especially Mary Magdalene, had become dispirited as they tried to make sense of the torture and violent death of their teacher. In my sermon at last night's vigil I mentioned the effect of trauma on memory and Peter's inability to remember that Jesus had told him that he would rise from death. It was as if the events of the last week of Jesus' life were so shocking to them they forgot all that had happened in the previous three years.

When Peter and John reached the tomb, and went inside to see that the body of Jesus had gone, everything clicked for them and they instantly recalled that Jesus had forearmed them with the knowledge that he would not be held down by death. It must have been a euphoric experience for them, so much so that they left Mary alone in the garden with the empty tomb.

Mary's experience was slightly different. She was a little more apprehensive about going inside the tomb because she was so upset that the tomb had been interfered with. Rather than boldly enter she meekly peers inside the tomb to assure herself that the body of Jesus was not there. When she did peer inside the tomb she encountered the presence of two angels who questioned why she was crying. Mary responded with her concern that someone had stolen the body of her teacher. She turned immediately to see a man standing close by and asked him where he might have taken the body. Mary didn't recognize him which illustrates for us the resurrected body is different, or at least looks different from that which died.

It is when Jesus speaks to her that she fully comprehends that Jesus has in fact overcome physical death and is risen just as he predicted. Her senses must have been racing as her reality in the garden, and her memory of her life with Jesus, collided into the realization that something extraordinary had occurred. Jesus then asked her to take her witness to the others so that they too may share in the joy of their risen Lord. I am always fascinated by this resurrection account and by the renewed body of Jesus, fresh from the clutches of death.

Likewise, I am also fascinated by the story of people who fall from grace only to use their experience to rebuild their lives. Their rise from their often darkest hour is testimony to the ability of each of us to overcome death, in the sense of our old self dying to allow new life. Jesus tells us in John 12:24, that "unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." When we die to self, we are born to new life.

Last Sunday if you were not in church you might have witnessed a resurrection moment playing out in real time when Tiger Woods won his fifth Master's golf tournament, against significant odds. A gifted golfer and one of the world's most recognizable and highly paid sports stars, Tiger Woods was born and raised to be a champion golfer. Unfortunately for him, his disciplined life

lacked the necessary love and nurturing that would have seen a different, more holistic man grow.

Like many sports stars today, he was very talented as a young man but shy and lonely. He was a champion collegiate golfer at Stanford University before deciding to turn professional in 1996. He was instantly rewarded with a \$60m contract. A young man with lots of money and a distorted sense of reality proved to be a dangerous combination. His life was that of a star. Multiple tournament wins, a single mindedness that cowered the best players of his day and a gaggle of managers, coaches, and all sorts to tend to his every whim.

Despite his relentless winning nature his shadow side was emerging. A self-centeredness developed that manifested in an addiction to sex and a blasé attitude to women and those around him. In 2009, his life ran off the rails in a spectacular fall from grace. After a stint in rehab he set about rebuilding his life stating that he wanted to be a good role model for his two young children. Over the past ten years he has largely succeeded, despite a significant back injury in 2016. His win last Sunday was the pinnacle of his journey of redemption. He had managed to regenerate himself as a more holistic human being. Faith in God may not have played a part for him but God's creation of the human condition allowed for his resurrection.

A couple of weeks ago there was an article in the NY Times about Alex Rodriguez, the infamous NY Yankees player who was considered one of the biggest bad guys in the league. Again, he was a special talent that went from his high school prom to playing at Fenway Park, all within a few months. And of course, there was lots of money and hangers on. A-Rod manufactured a persona to play up his toughness and admits that he overreached and lost control of who he was. After a suspension for drug use in 2014 he started to reassess his life. Through sheer hard work in therapy he came to understand himself more fully and why his life had taken the turn it had. He too has managed to resurrect himself as a husband and commentator in good standing. He had to die to self so that he could be born to new life, a life that was within him and needed to be found.

For these stories of high profile people experiencing their own personal resurrection, there are millions of stories of people like you and me who have experienced something similar. I will never forget Craig who was a patron of Rough Edges, the drop-in center that was operated by the church I attended in Sydney. Craig was a lonely figure every week that I saw him. Often very disheveled he lived rough on the streets. He suffered with significant mental illness, primarily schizophrenia and we saw many different sides of Craig as he struggled with his life.

He disappeared for a time. This was a regular occurrence as patrons often ended up in jail for short periods or left the city to find shelter someplace else. One night as I was serving food for the patrons a well-dressed, clean shaven man approached the counter. I had a double take as I recognized that it was Craig. He had been away in hospital and had finally managed to control his illness and had been able to find housing. He was a completely different man both physically and spiritually.

I was blown away and immediately thought about the witness accounts of Jesus resurrection. Jesus appeared to many but they didn't recognize him, his body was changed but he was still true to who he had been.

Many people get broken by addiction, incarceration, domestic abuse or other such traumatic life events. Many unfortunately are unable or unwilling to recognize that something better lies beyond the broken life. It is hard to imagine that the pain and suffering of someone's life can be overcome and new life, in all its spring-like glory, can be a real possibility.

In our Epistle reading from Paul's letter to the Corinthians, he tells them of his own resurrection of sorts. Paul says, "For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them--though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me."

Paul's life was transformed and his witness of the risen Christ that he provided the ancient world, and our world today through his letters, is testimony to the incredible gift that Jesus has given to those that are able to accept that a new life lies beyond the grave of their old life. Paul encouraged the Corinthians to similarly turn their lives around because the grace of God was available to all, as we all contain the seeds of the grace of God in our souls.

On this great day as we celebrate new life through our risen Lord we can take heart that no one should be lost to the world. All are offered a place in the new Jerusalem. All can find new life if only the old self-centered life can be overcome. Mary Magdalene, Simon Peter, John, Paul and many others lived lives of incredible witness to the power of God to transform lives.

William Sloane Coffin, long time pastor of Riverside Church said, "The whole point of Jesus' resurrection is to produce our own, by putting love in our hearts, decent thoughts in our heads, and a little more iron in our spines. Christ is risen to convert us, not from this life to some other life, but from something less than life to the possibility of full life itself. Irenaeus, a 4th century church father wrote that "The glory of God is (a human being) fully alive."¹

How alive are you? Are you a product of Jesus' resurrection? I pray that on this day, the day of Easter celebration, we can all say we are fully alive in Jesus Christ.

Alleluia, Christ is Risen.

¹ Sloane Coffin, William *The Collected Sermons of William Sloane Coffin, the Riverside Years Vol. 2*, John Knox Press, Louisville KY, 2008 p264