St Peter the Fisherman – Whitianga
Sunday March 31st 2024).

Theme: Easter and the Resurrection of Christ

Kia Manakohia nga kupu a toku mangai, me nga whakaaro o toku ngakau, i tou aroaro, e Ihowa, e toku Kamaka, e toku kaihoko.

*(Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer).*

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In my early days, innocent of the challenges ahead of me studying Theology, my first lecturer said to us, “well, you are all here, ostensibly to study Theology. What do you understand by that?”

(What is Theology?)

With the confidence of complete ignorance my hand popped up – (I really must learn not to do that) – and I offered ‘I think it is the study of God’. “Mmmm”, was the response. “Yeees, but does anyone else have another suggestion?” A highly confident student, for whom this clearly wasn’t the first class, said “I think it is about Faith seeking understanding”.

(Faith seeking understanding)

 “Yes, indeed” replied our lecturer.

I was totally crushed by the depth of the thought behind the response and vowed never to offer an opinion on anything theological again – at least not until the next time my mouth got in the way of my brain.

I was however then somewhat mollified by his comment to my fellow student “I am pleased you remembered this from our discussion last semester”.

This is exactly what it is like being a Christian. We walk in a life of faith, seeking understanding of something we believe, but of which there is no scientific proof, amid plenty of learned and not so learned people telling us our faith is nothing but a fantasy.

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Our witness at Easter, even if it is just attending an Easter worship service, is about that faith. Jesus of Nazareth, the Jewish prophet, teacher, and healer, horrifically crucified two days earlier, was raised from that death to a new life by God, sometime early on the Sabbath morning, exactly as he had predicted before his arrest, trial and death.

(Jesus resurrected)

Without Easter we probably wouldn’t know about Jesus. If his story had ended with his crucifixion, he most likely would have been forgotten – just another Jew crucified by the Roman Empire in a horrific century that witnessed thousands of such executions. Maybe a trace or two of him might have shown up in some early Jewish historical writings, but that would likely have been all. For Mary who found the tomb empty; and the disbelieving apostles who she told, (and then of course who went to check out her story); even the appearance of angels affirming that Jesus’ prophecy about himself had come true; was just too much to take in, and the story may have ended there.

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What matters, is that the truth about Easter doesn’t necessarily lie in knowing what happened to Jesus’ body, but in the transformed lives of his disciples afterwards, and in the transformation of our own lives today. Those people started off being confused and distressed, as we would have been in the same situation, about what had happened to the body of their beloved leader. The four Gospel writers who recorded the events of that weekend, between 30 and up to 70 years after it, give us only a little help. They all agree that the tomb in which Jesus’ body was laid that Friday evening, was found empty two days later, but only John, (and Mark in a brief appendix to his Gospel) provide that appearance to Mary Magdalene.

(Mary and Jesus)

However, they all adamantly affirm the transformation that took place in his followers, as Jesus appeared to them successively over several days afterwards.

(Jesus and disciples)

So, no, we Christians do not know, and cannot prove, what happened to Jesus’ body, any more than we can easily explain exactly how a caterpillar becomes a butterfly, which while developed from it, is totally different in appearance and function.

(Butterfly clip)

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Our faith in Jesus’ resurrection is linked to what happened to his disciples. Our pre-understanding, as Christians, of the Easter story, the Good Friday story, and yes, also the Christmas story, shapes how we hear the story each time it is told. We gather this pre-understanding by combining all those Easter stories in the gospels into a sort of composite picture, then looking at it through a lens of how, over our lives, we have received our Christian preaching, teaching, reading, hymns, etc. This pre-understanding often tempts us to try to confirm or defend the factuality of the event.

(Versions of the resurrection)

The trouble is that like witnesses to an event such as a car accident or a robbery, the gospels do differ on details, although they can still be reliable witnesses to the reality of the event itself. Thus, it may not be important whether there was one angel (Mark and Matthew) or two (John, and Luke) at the tomb, one woman or several, or how we should try to combine the further stories that Jesus’ followers did indeed have contact with him in and around Jerusalem for up to 40 days later.

The important issue about being an Easter Christian is that we believe the tomb really was empty – (and that wasn’t because someone had stolen the body or they went to the wrong tomb) – and Jesus really did appear to several of his followers after his death in a form that could be seen, heard, and touched. There were witnesses, who brought their likely incomplete, memories to the debate.

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This so-called lack of definitive proof is still a stumbling block for many people, who feel that if they can’t believe these stories to be scientifically proven and thus factual, and this factuality is essential to being Christian, then they can’t be Christians. This misses the meaning behind the stories, namely getting past the question ‘did the **detail** of each incident happen exactly as told, or not?’ to reach through to understanding the more important question. Was Jesus resurrected as he claimed he would be? The events did occur because there were several different people, as various levels of imperfect witnesses, to them.

So ‘What do these incidents really mean?’ The conclusion must be, Jesus told his followers the truth.

As Christians, not just on days like today, but every day, we carry our faith constantly seeking understanding. We don’t have to understand God in His entirety to have faith. God is, and will always be, a mystery, but becomes real to us in the personage of Jesus. Faith comes first, and then if we work at it, we are led us to deeper understanding. We see this so clearly in the Easter season.

(Empty tomb)

When the women then Peter and John went to the tomb and found it empty, they certainly did not understand everything that had happened. But, they remembered his words. Their lack of understanding at that moment didn’t keep them from having faith. Rather, they began with faith, which led them on to greater understanding at Pentecost and in the days and weeks that came after.

When we leave here and go to our homes for our shared meals, we take with us the central meaning of Easter. It is that *Jesus lives.*

(Jesus resurrected)

The truth of that affirmation is grounded in the experiences of Christians like us right throughout the centuries. It isn’t essential for us to have experiences such as the first disciples did in those days leading up to Jesus’ Ascension. To quote from John’s Easter story “Blessed are those who have **not** seen and yet believe”. Easter is not just about an afterlife, or happy endings with chocolate eggs that remind us of the new life he brought us, it is about God’s unequivocal **“yes”** to Jesus, and **“no”** to the evil powers that killed him. Every time we witness to this by worshipping in his name, and living the kind of life he hopes of us, we reaffirm that the spirit and the presence that his followers knew in him both before his death and after his resurrection, continues to be known through us. ***Jesus lives***.

Kia koa, kia hari, ko te Karaiti te aranga, te taroi o te riri.

Rejoice and be glad, for Christ is resurrection, reconciliation for all the human race. Amen

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