

Sermon preached at Gisborne on Easter Sunday, 4 April 2021

*Lord God, you have declared that your kingdom is among us. Open our eyes to see it, our ears to hear it, our hearts to hold it, our hands to serve it. This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Isaiah 25:6-9; Mark 16:1-8

### ***Easter - God's yes to life!***

Last Sunday, I attended *Te Hāhi service* at Alive church. *Te Hāhi Aotearoa* was first established in Gisborne in 2016, where a number of churches partnered with the local Police to support families following a domestic incident. It provides pastoral care to families while supporting the work of Police and other agencies. What made me impressed was that people who attended the service. They looked passionate about the purpose of the service. They seemed to live by the spirit of Easter. By walking along with the victims of domestic violence, these Christian people have helped them to see life beyond death. For me, their actions as a whole says 'yes to life,' which is a gift from God. Easter is a story of life in God, and it always includes ordinary people's life stories, whether small or big. Easter is 'God's yes to life', and we'd like to follow the first witnesses to the tomb. It will also help us say 'yes to life,' which begins from our own lives and in the end, it will embrace others, too.

In Easter, we see 'God's yes to life' is working beyond time and space. In Mark, we are accompanying the three women – two Marys and Salome to the tomb where the body of Jesus was placed. It was the time of the Passover, which occurred at the start of spring, so the weather would probably be cool. The women seemed to wait anxiously until the sabbath was over as shops wouldn't open during the sabbath. They needed to buy spices to anoint the body of Jesus. As the sabbath day ended at sundown Saturday night, they went out to purchase the spices. However, the women couldn't go to Jesus' grave on Saturday night. The city of Jerusalem was protected by walls and gates, and they were shut and locked at night for the protection of the city. The women were forced to wait until dawn on Sunday morning to bring the spices to Jesus' grave. At dawn on Sunday morning, they left the city immediately after the gates were opened. As Mark reports, they carried the spices while hoping to reach Jesus' body in the tomb. By the fact that they brought spices to anoint Jesus' dead body and concerns about the stone on the tomb, they didn't expect Jesus literally rise from the dead. At this stage, a question may arise - why they wanted to go back to the tomb even though Jesus' body was already placed in the tomb. When spices were used for a dead body, it was to control the smell of decomposition.

As Jews did not practise embalming, the funeral spices were a way to help minimize unpleasant odours.<sup>1</sup> The spices the women brought to Jesus' tomb were presumably intended to eliminate such an odour and honour the body of Christ. Here we see the two different perspectives of life converge – the faithful women's lives as well as God's. Their love for Jesus had brought them to the tomb again, and God made them be the first witnesses of the resurrection. By the time they got there, the stone was already rolled away from the tomb, and unexpected things were waiting for them.

God's yes to life often brings us surprises, and it leads us to unexpected experiences. When the women had arrived at the tomb, they found the large stone was already rolled away. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side. They were alarmed, of course. But without giving them any chance to ask him, the young man told them that Jesus was raised already. He also gave them a message from the risen Jesus addressed to them. The women were fleeing from the tomb “for terror (Greek: τρόμος: *tromos* trembling, fear) and amazement (Greek: ἔκστασις: *extasis* - ecstatic or ecstasy) had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” (16:8)<sup>2</sup>

One of surprises on Easter, God was actively working in ordinary human lives even though people didn't realize their part in this extraordinary event as witnesses. God used every small thing to be woven into the grand tapestry of life. During the Passover meal with the disciples, Jesus had already told them that it would happen: “You will all become deserters; for it is written, ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.’” “But I will go before you to Galilee.”<sup>3</sup>

Another surprise is that the witnesses of the empty tomb were a message itself to be proclaimed. That is, when the women were told to ‘go, tell,’<sup>4</sup> they were not given any specific messages to tell the other disciples but their own experiences. Christ Jesus wanted them to tell what they had seen and heard.

Why Galilee, then? There are a few things to consider. First, Galilee was the native country of the Apostles, to which, after the death of Jesus, they were purposing to return as we see in John 21. Second, in Galilee, Jesus had preached for the most part of his ministry and performed very

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<sup>1</sup> John 11:39 - For example, at the tomb of Lazarus, when Jesus asked for the stone to be rolled away from the mouth of the tomb, Martha objected as there was already a stench because he had been dead four days

<sup>2</sup> Mark 16:8 Καὶ ἐξελθοῦσαι ἔφυγον ἀπὸ τοῦ μνημείου, εἶχεν γὰρ αὐτὰς τρόμος καὶ ἔκστασις· καὶ οὐδενὶ οὐδὲν εἶπαν· ἐφοβοῦντο γάρ.

<sup>3</sup> Mark 14:28

<sup>4</sup> Mark 16:7a

many miracles. Thirdly, he would commission them to deliver the good news to all the world. When the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them, Jesus commissioned them as messengers of the good news. Jesus said:

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”<sup>5</sup>

God’s yes to life renews our ordinary lives daily and defeats all the sufferings and death for good. It includes meal sharing and wiping away the tears from all faces and the disgrace of God’s people. In Isaiah 25 which is called ‘the little apocalypse,’ Isaiah describes how God will judge the adversaries of Israel and what God will give His people. In the past, Israel had had such a meal before on Mt Sinai when the meal was served in part to ratify the covenant between God and Israel.<sup>6</sup> The meal marked the people’s transition from death to life, from slavery under Pharaoh to life with YHWH. This time also the meal on Mt Zion was intended to achieve the same thing. But Isaiah 25 is not all about beautiful images of loving and tender God. It also portrays God, who is strong and more vicious than death. That is, ‘God’s yes to life’ involves not only a comforting meal and wiping away the tears from people, but also fierce fights against the fear of sufferings and death.

On Easter, we, as well as the women, the disciples and people of faith before us start anew, follow Jesus to the end. It also lets us ask this question: How do we say ‘yes to life’ in Christ? When many more people in this country spend Easter weekend as one of the national holidays, where do we go and what do we tell them about Easter? With Jesus, the crucified – risen Christ, God’s kingdom has secretly exploded into this world. No matter how often we fall off, no matter how small it is, our small acts of words and deeds will be woven into God’s tapestry that will be completed in God’s good time. We, too, have received the commission to go and tell through our entire lives, which is our ways to say ‘yes to life’ in Christ. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew 28:18b-20

<sup>6</sup> Exodus 24:9-11