

Acts 10:34-43

Everything has changed

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the risen Lord Jesus. Amen.

When the women approached the tomb on that first Easter morning, they weren't expecting anything different. They had come prepared with spices to anoint a body that had been hastily buried before the Sabbath. They were thinking about the large stone that had been placed at the entrance to the tomb. But everything had changed. The stone was rolled away. The tomb was open. There was no body. They were in the right place. The young man assured them that this was where they had laid the body of Jesus of Nazareth. But he wasn't there. He had been raised. Raised to life again.

Here in Mark's gospel account, this challenge to the expected reality was too much for the women. Their immediate reaction was terror and amazement. Everything had changed, and they struggled to deal with it. In the other Gospels and in the book of Acts we see a few different reactions to this fundamental change to reality. It takes all of the disciples some time to process it all. Jesus had died, and now he lives. Death is no longer the end. This changed the way they looked at the world, at other people, at their own lives, their own purpose.

We see some of that from the Apostle Peter in our reading from Acts. This was a sermon he preached some years later, but the effects of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead are still unfolding in his life. He finally understands that the resurrection of Jesus was a world-changing event. This wasn't just about the people of Israel and their messiah, but all of God's creation. The scourge of death that had affected all of creation since the fall into sin had now met its match. God had died on a cross and then risen to life again. And this was good news for every nation on earth.

God had announced his intentions through the people of Israel, but the risen Lord Jesus is Lord of all. The events of Jesus' life and ministry happened in and around Judea, but he now sits at the right hand of the Father, ready to judge all people. Pilate may have nailed a sign to the cross saying 'Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews', but Jesus is the King of kings and Lord of lords. The book of Deuteronomy declares a divine curse upon anyone who is executed by hanging on a tree, but this was the moment Jesus showed his faithfulness to the Father's will. And all this is brought front and centre when Jesus is raised from the dead. St Paul says in Romans, "Jesus Christ our Lord was shown to be the Son of God when God powerfully raised him from the dead by means of the Holy Spirit." (Romans 1:4)

There is nothing like the power of Jesus' resurrection from the dead that proves to a sinful world that he indeed is who he says he is. He is Lord. He is saviour. He is king. He is victorious. He is risen! And all this leads us to see things differently. Believing in a risen Lord Jesus changes how we see the world. For Peter, the first thing that became clear was that God shows no partiality. God is just and fair, and treats all equally, regardless of wealth or power or status. And this means that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is good news for everybody. Whether Jew or Gentile, there is good news.

This good news cannot be contained. The resurrection is not just a past event, a mere story about something in history. God's work of new life, of resurrection, of bringing life out of death, is ongoing. Jesus lives, and God is still calling people to be witnesses to the risen Jesus. Peter's witness is deeply challenging. He declares that Jesus is Lord of all. This goes beyond Peter's own faith community. This confronts the imperial powers. If Jesus has overcome death, then all earthly powers and divisions and no longer mean much at all.

This changes Peter. He had not imagined himself welcoming an uncircumcised Gentile as a brother in the faith, but that's exactly what he does. He proclaims the risen Jesus to anyone who will listen. All sorts of people are converted and come to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, and that he is their redeemer. And this brings great hope. A morning that was meant to be filled with grief and tending to the body of the crucified Jesus, had become one of hope and amazement. Christ is risen from the dead. Death has lost its sting. And our future is full of hope.

As St Paul tells the Corinthian church, Christ's resurrection is the first-fruits of the great harvest that is to come. Those who believe in Christ, even though they have 'fallen asleep', remain united with their Lord Jesus. And since they are united to this resurrected Jesus, they are safe with him awaiting the day of judgment and the resurrection of the dead. Without this, there would be no hope. Death would have the last say. St Paul says it in no uncertain terms, 'If Christ has not been raised, then we, out of all people, are to be most pitied'. Without the resurrection, we have no gospel, no salvation, no saving message, and certainly no future hope.

But since Christ has been raised, we are those who can look death in the face knowing that it has no final victory, no lasting sting. Because Christ is risen our lives have changed. Because Christ is risen, we have every assurance that our efforts for the gospel, feeble though they may be, and never done in vain. Because Christ is risen, we have a future that is safe and secure. Praise be to God. Amen.

May God's peace, which passes all human understanding keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.