

Reading: Matthew 28:1-10

Like so many I was the happy recipient of a Cadbury great Easter bunny – one made of a glass and a half of ‘pure cream milk’. However, I was more than a little shocked to read on the box the story of the great bunny. Cadbury writes the reason we came up with the story of the great bunny is because there is no story of Easter.

I wonder where Cadbury has been the last 2000 years!

Right at the heart of today's gospel story is Mary Magdalene who didn't get much sleep the night before Easter Sunday. Healed of 7 demons by Jesus, her loyalty and her devotion to Him knew no bounds. Unlike most of the men, she stood by Him at His crucifixion. She went early to the tomb, weary with the grief of weeping for her dead Saviour and friend. But if she wasn't completely awake she soon would be. There was an earthquake. (We in Canterbury know how quickly they wake you up.) Then there was an angel, followed by the news that Jesus was no longer dead but He was alive.

Matthew, the gospel writer, sums up her overwhelming and mixed emotions of fear and joy. Most English Bibles have Jesus saying “Greetings,” but a word I reckon closer to the Greek is “Rejoice,” Jesus says to her, “but go and tell the others.”

This morning we awake to the news that will greet a billion other people after us, across every island and continent - that the dead and buried Jesus is alive. No longer do we need to be afraid, because Jesus has taken the power from death.

In the aftermath of the deadly Christchurch earthquakes, Paul Stanaway had the job of ministering Easter Hope. As a chaplain to Burnham Military Camp, it was his job to attend the mortuary. “I was there to give hope,” he recounted. “As the bodies arrived, I would walk up and down singing very, very quietly. Each body was received with a prayer and the presence of God was very powerful. When the young mother and baby were brought in, everyone looked to me. I simply took myself over to the baby and just stood alongside the workers. People knew I was there to carry the burden. I think,” he concluded, “having a person of hope gave others permission to do their jobs, knowing someone else was there, keeping love and hope alive.”

I wonder as you come to Easter this year, what part of your life do you need to keep hope and love alive in. It may be the grief of losing a friend; it may be loss of a relationship or income or it may be that, like many others, you struggle with

depression or mental illness. Each of us is vulnerable to despair in our lives. Jesus words are for us, "Do not be afraid."

As Easter people we know that whatever we fear in our lives has been transformed by Jesus' dying and rising again.

If our fear of death had been taken away you would expect Christians not be afraid to die for Jesus' sake. This is indeed the case and has always been so.

In early 2003 the Solomon Islands experienced a period of civil unrest. One of the leading guerrilla rebels was Harold Keke, who led the Guadalcanal Liberation Army in the remote and underdeveloped south coast of the Island. Early in 2003 Anglican **Brother Nathaniel** went to see Keke to negotiate peace. He knew Harold Keke and called him a friend. That trust was misplaced and he was the first to die, being tortured and beaten to death at Easter.

Six other Brothers set off from Honiara to find out what had happened to Nathaniel. For over three months the community waited day and night, hoping and praying for their safety. Making contact with Keke was difficult. Finally their worst fears were confirmed. The Melanesian Brotherhood was officially informed by the Police Commissioner that Keke had admitted that all six were dead.

The funerals of the seven Brothers were very moving. The Government declared a Day of National Mourning and a State Funeral. The procession left for the Brotherhood Headquarters and thousands of people lined the streets, many throwing flowers onto the coffins as they passed. The full community of Brothers and Novices, dressed in their white 'uniforms', stood at the bottom of the hill holding back the grief-stricken sea of humanity of over 20,000 men, women and children.

The church will remember them in just a few days, on the 24th of April. But rather than a terrible day of mourning the memory of the deaths of the seven Brothers has become a rallying point for reconciliation, for healing and for hope.

You would expect that the deaths of those brothers would have slowed the growth of the Brotherhood. Today it has spread into PNG and New Caledonia and there are now over 600 brothers. For every brother who died, more have come forward from the community to take their place.

Whatever deadliness we face in our lives, whatever fears, and there are many... we know that Jesus has taken the sting of death in his hands and in his feet...so we can

say with St Paul... "Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?"

Stewart Henderson, a 20th century poet puts it beautifully in his poem *There was no grave:*

*There was no grave grave enough
to ground me
to mound me
I broke the balm then slit the shroud
wound round me
that bound me*

*There was no death dead enough
to dull me
to cull me
I snapped the snake and waned his war
to lull me
to null me*

*There was no cross cross enough
to nil me
to still me
I hung as gold that bled, and bloomed
A rose that rose and prised the tomb
away from Satan's willful doom
There was no cross, death, grave
or room
to hold me.*

I'll be the first to tuck into my great bunny, but let's not forget the real story of Easter: the story of a love so strong that all we fear, including death itself, has been swallowed up in the rising of Christ our Lord.