

God's Love is Stronger than Death

Sermon Easter 2018

Reading: The gospel John 20:1 to 18

May the words spoken bring us the hope and light of Easter. In Jesus name, **Amen.**

The first Easter begins in darkness. Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb. The day is still dark and so is she; dark with despair and grief. She doesn't yet know that God's love is stronger than death. The custom was to visit the tomb for three days of lament as the spirit left the body. I heard of two people who arrived in heaven at the same time. One was an Australian cricketer and the other a Russian. St Peter greeted them and asked the Russian if she had done anything notable in her life. "Oh yes," she said, "I protested for democracy and against the cruel reign of President Vladimir Putin." "That's great," St Peter said, "When did you do that?" "About two minutes ago," she replied. And the Australian cricketer - I just included him to show how forgiving God really is.

Moving right on. Mary finds the covering stone of Jesus tomb is gone. She would have assumed that either the authorities had taken his body or that grave robbers had broken in seeking the rich spices and cloths.

So she runs. She runs to get help. The men disciples didn't believe Mary. In our enlightened times men always believe what women say, but

not that day. They don't yet know that God's love is stronger than death.

Peter and one other disciple ran too and soon arrived to discover the empty tomb. They looked in and the burial clothes, probably on a shelf cut into the rock, are lying flat, body-less.

Mary stays outside the tomb frozen by grief. By now the light is beginning to dawn. Mary is so locked in her own tears that the one standing beside her she assumes to be the gardener. Then comes the moment that history forever pivots on. He says her name "Mary!" It is the Risen Jesus. In that moment her grief and tears are transformed. Embracing him, she begins to see in the light of morning that God's love is stronger than death.

160 years ago, on another Easter the congregation of St Peter's gathered to have Bishop Harper lay the stone that was to become the first St Peter's church. Like every other church before and since it was built on the foundation of Risen Jesus. The congregation quickly outgrew its little wooden building and a brick chancel was added. That also became too small and a stone church was built. So many people's lives have been transformed by the presence of St Peter's church in this community; a sign of Easter hope, a sign that God's love is stronger than death. Not content to keep the Good News to themselves, they started Riccarton Primary School on this site in 1873. The Good News was carried to Fendalton to start the Parish there in 1883. In 1963 the Easter message was carried by this congregation to start Avonhead Parish and much more recently, in 1995, Petersgate Counselling Center

was started right here on site, one of the biggest counselling centers in the South Island. Last year we rented number 31 Lyndhurst to Youth Pathways to help keep young people out of prison.

At the conclusion of this service you are invited to follow the procession over to the Church where the Reverend David Winfield, the wonderful convener of the Fundraising Committee, will turn the first sod of our restoration project. There has been a whole team behind David, too many to thank now, but I am so grateful for your generous support. We aren't there yet but I hope we will soon be able to return to an enhanced St Peter' s as a symbol of hope in this community.

But how can love triumph over death in our world. Recently I heard the story of Dave. Dave felt called to go to India to work among the very poorest. He felt God was calling him to bring Good News to the young girls trapped in prostitution in Calcutta but he really had no clue how to make a difference.

He discovered that most days one of the girls would die a terrible death of AIDS. One of the madams would order four terrified girls to carry the diseased body out on a sheet and literally throw the body on the rubbish heap.

Dave and a few friends would go to the rubbish heap and tenderly wrap the body in clean sheets carry the girl to a freshly dug grave which they had purchased, put flowers on the grave and with songs and prayers they would give her a Christian burial.

This happened for many months. Many deaths later a small group of girls would follow Dave and the team.

Then came the breakthrough the team had been waiting for. “Why are you doing this?” one of the frightened girls asked Dave. “Because God loves her,” came his simple reply.

More weeks went by, another question “Can you tell me about God’s love?”

Once the conversations began there was no stopping them. Just recently Dave and his team baptized 3000 girls who had asked to become Christians. With the support of the local church they have begun new lives free of prostitution.

In a beautiful essay on the resurrection, theologian and writer Chris Barnes reminds us of what actually matters during Holy Week: “The question that Easter asks of us is not, ‘Do we believe in the doctrine of the resurrection?’ Frankly, that is not particularly hard. Our doctrines bend easily to conform to the darkness. What the Gospels ask is not, ‘Do you believe?’ but ‘Have you encountered the risen Christ?’

In other words, can you be like Mary and hear the voice of Jesus saying your name? Today, right now, Jesus is greeting you with your name. The Risen Christ is alive still and to hear his voice for yourself is to know your darkness transformed into light, your despair into hope, your life into purpose.

To hear that voice is to begin a journey to discover that God's love truly is stronger than death.