

## Sermon Easter Sunday 2023

### Matthew 28:1-10

There's the story of the boy who went into a drug store. He goes over to the phone, puts in his coins and dials a number. The store owner observed and couldn't help overhearing the conversation.

Boy: 'Lady, can you give me a job mowing your lawn?' Woman: (on the other end of the phone) 'I already have someone to mow my lawn.' Boy: 'Lady, I will mow your lawn for half the price of the person who mows your lawn now.' Woman: 'I'm very satisfied with the person who is presently mowing my lawn.' Boy: 'I'll sweep your drive as well.' Woman: 'No thank you.'

The boy replaced the receiver with a smile on his face. The store owner, who was listening to all this, walked over to the boy. 'Son, I like your attitude. I like that positive spirit and would like to offer you a job.' The boy said, 'No thanks.' 'But you were really pleading for one,' said the store owner. The boy replied, 'No, sir, I was just checking my performance at the job I already have. I am the one who is working for that lady I was speaking to!'

That is called self-appraisal. Easter is a time for self-appraisal in terms of our faith. Where am I in this Easter story, a story of sacrifice, a story of death, of anguish, of completion. Jesus cries from the cross, 'It is finished.' But then we have resurrection, then we have new beginnings, then we have hope. I want to focus for a moment on this word *hope*.

What a wonderful thing hope is. I think it is something we take somewhat for granted. Think about it, if you don't have hope, what do you have? We all know that expression, '*Where there is hope, there is life.*' So how does this relate to my spiritual perspective, my spiritual life?

Recently we all took part in the latest census. I am not sure when the results of that census will be made available to us. I suspect that one outcome will be the revealing of a downward trend in recent times of people who claim association with religion, in other words, who claim to have a faith. So does this threaten the validity of our religion? Not for me it doesn't, and I say that for several reasons.

In some parts of the Western world, there is certainly a decline in Christian numbers, but globally, Christianity is on the rise, especially in Africa and Asia. And interestingly, according to the 2022 Status of Global Christianity Report, there are fewer atheists around the world at present (147 million) than there were in 1970 (165 million). And just in case you are wondering, there are presently 2.56 billion Christians worldwide, a figure that is projected to rise to 3.3 billion in 2050.

I listen to the stories of millions of people down through the ages whose lives have been transformed through their experience of God and Christ. I pick up the Bible, sales of which far outstrip every other book year after year. Another interesting statistic – this year 93 million Bibles will be printed, up from 54 million in the year 2000. That's an increase of almost 40 million in just three years! Does that give me hope? It certainly does.

Then despite what the TV news and the newspapers tell me, I am aware that every day throughout the world there are thousands and thousands of people making sacrifices for the benefit of others. That is God at work. For me that is what God is – the spirit of love working in people through people.

So I am filled with hope. Everything goes in cycles. Religion, the Church have had their ups and downs throughout the ages. Hopefully, we evolve and meet those challenges. I say hopefully, because I believe

the model of our church has to evolve with our changing society. Gone are the days when we could sit in our churches and wait for the people to walk through the doors. The church has to move out into the community and engage out there. If we are to be relevant, if we are to be a valid and useful vehicle for God's love in the community, that has got to happen.

In the end, for us Christians it begins with the empty tomb, the risen Christ, who through that act proved that he is indeed the Son of God. That validates our worship and our faith. That provides us with the incentive and motivation to serve, to reach out to those in need, in other words, to practise our faith. That is part of our history, part of whom we are. We cannot escape from that, and that is what gives us hope.

I want to finish by alluding to chapter 15 of John's Gospel. John talks a lot about love and this chapter is no exception. He aligns love with the presence of God. At this point, I remind you of the definition of God I referred to – 'the spirit of love working in people, through people.' John goes on to say that, 'the greatest love a person can show is to lay down their life for their friends.' So it is in this ultimate sacrifice that we see the true glory of God.

On August 16 1987 Northwest Airlines flight 225 crashed just after taking off from Detroit Airport, killing 155 people. One survived, a four-year-old girl named Cecelia.

News accounts say when rescuers found Cecelia, they did not believe she had been on the plane. Investigators first assumed Cecelia had been a passenger in one of the cars on the highway onto which the plane crashed. But when the passenger register for the flight was checked, there was Cecelia's name.

Cecelia survived because, even as the plane was falling, Cecelia's mother unbuckled her seat belt, got down on her knees in front of her daughter, wrapped her arms and body around her and then would not let go.

That is true love in action. That is the sort of love Jesus is referring to in John's Gospel. That is the sort of love which is manifested in the sacrifice Jesus makes on the cross and which we celebrate at Easter. And that is what inspires my faith and gives me hope.