

Sermon Easter Sunday 2026

Colossians 3:1-4 Matthew 28:1-10

There's the story of the boy who went into a shop and asks the shopkeeper if he could use his phone. 'By all means,' says the shopkeeper. The boy dials a number and the shopkeeper couldn't help but overhear 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: '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 shopkeeper, who was listening to all this, said 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 shopkeeper. The boy replied, 'No, sir, I was just checking on my performance at the job I already have. I am the one 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 the resurrection, then we have new beginnings, then we have hope. I want to focus for a moment on the word *hope*, a word I alluded to last week.

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

The 2023 census showed that the downward trend of those claiming to be of the Christian faith continues. In 2001 approximately 60% of our population acknowledged an association with the Christian faith. In 2023 that had dropped to just 32%. As Anglicans, the news is not encouraging. Our share of the population claiming to be Anglican had dropped from 16% to under 5%, or translated into numbers, from 485,000 to 245,000. To say we have a challenge on our hands would be an understatement, but I will come back to that in a moment.

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 numbers of Christians, 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 2.6 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 – last year over 100 million Bibles were sold worldwide, up from 54 million in the year 2,000. Sales have almost doubled in just 5 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. You have heard me say this on more than one occasion in recent times, and I make absolutely no apologies for that. If we are to be relevant, if we are to be a valid and useful vehicle for God's presence in the community, that has got to happen.

A prime focus in the life of our church is our Sunday worship. I think we would all agree on that. The point I want to make is this, if we are to be a relevant and valid church, then the nature of that worship,

the structure of that worship, the language we use, and most importantly, the messages we promote must relate to our everyday lives, must relate to our lives at home, at work, in the community Monday to Saturday. Otherwise, I really would question the point of it all.

There was a very interesting article in the NZ Herald yesterday. The article stated that there appears to be a rising interest in Christianity by Generation Z. Generation Z are those people in their early 20's through to early 30's. This, of course, bucks the trend I have referred to of falling numbers attending church in recent years. Religious historian, Dr Peter Lineham, said in this article, *'We are certainly seeing a greater awareness of spirituality in society.'* This certainly fills me with hope. However, what is also very interesting is that in an article I read a few months ago that was commenting on Generation Z's growing interest in spirituality, is that the prime issue for them in the promotion or practice of any religion was relevancy. If it wasn't applicable to their everyday lives, they would not be adherents. If we are to tap into this growing awareness of spirituality in society, then we must be mindful of this, we must attend to this.

Now getting back to our faith. *'Then the angel spoke to the women, "I know you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He isn't here! He is risen from the dead, just as he said it would happen.'* Matthew 28:5-6. 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 all and sundry, 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 gave you – *'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.'* John 15:13. So it is this ultimate sacrifice that we see the true glory of God.

On August 16 1987 Northwest Airlines flight 225 crashed soon after taking off from Detroit Airport, killing 155 people. One survived, a four-year-old girl named Cecilia. News accounts say when rescuers found Cecilia, they did not believe she had been on the plane. Investigators at first assumed Cecilia 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 Cecilia's name.

Cecilia survived because, even as the plane was falling, Cecilia'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 complete and unconditional love of a parent for her child. That is the sort of love John 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.

A brief thought to end on. *'Since you have been raised to new life with Christ, set your sights on the realities of heaven.'* Colossians 3:1. Christ's resurrection means that he is with us here today, here in this church, here in our lives, if we want him to be. Think about that.