

Moving On From Crucifying

*A sermon on Luke 24:1-12 & Romans 6:3-11 for the Paschal Vigil
by Nathan Nettleton, 16 April 2022*

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Message

The resurrection of Jesus opens a path and calls us to follow into a life that is no longer dominated by the crucifying powers that destroy some of us and dehumanise others.

Sermon

If we are honest about it, what we are celebrating tonight seems absurd. Resurrection. It is easy to see why most of the world finds it impossible to believe. And I don't mean scientifically impossible. There are much bigger reasons than that to write it off as hopelessly out of touch with basic reality.

Jesus has broken the power of death? Try telling that to the people of Bucha or Mariupol in Ukraine. Try telling that to a black man suffocating under the knee of a police officer in an American street or an Australian police lock-up.

Jesus has vanquished the powers of death and brought in a new day of justice and freedom for all? Try telling that to the hundreds of asylum seekers languishing in our Immigration Detention Centres year after year. Try telling that to YarZar's family in the refugee camp. Try telling that to Uncle Den whose mob are the most incarcerated people group on earth, locked up at 12 times the rate of non-indigenous Australians.

So what on earth do we think we are doing gathered here to celebrate Christ's victory over the powers of death when it is perfectly obvious every time you open your eyes or turn on the news that people are still being crucified all over the place and that life for most of the world's population is still being degraded and destroyed by the powers that crucify?

Most of us here are too privileged to notice just how bad things are for others, and so it doesn't seem so absurd to us to think that life has triumphed over evil and we are experiencing at least the beginnings of an age of justice and freedom. Privilege can be easily mistaken for justice. I'm an educated, employed, white, heterosexual male, and for me the world seems to be working pretty well, thank you very much, or at least it was until people started calling that out as privilege, and pointing out that privilege is just a nice word for benefitting from the oppression of others.

I live on stolen land, and I only get away with it because there are powers unleashed to crucify anyone who tries to take it back, locking them up at 12 times the rate of those of us who benefit from that theft. I wear clothes that were made affordable by the crippling exploitation of workers under the thumb of crucifying powers in sweat shops in Asia. I find most of the buildings I enter to be clean and hygienic because of the work of people like our brother YarZar who is slaving his guts out for pitiful wages while the crucifying powers find it electorally popular to not even let his wife and children join him here in Australia.

So if any of us here think that the joys and freedoms of our lives are evidence of the resurrection victory over the forces of death, we are completely deluding ourselves. Our joys and freedoms are a minority experience and are protected by powers that crucify, powers that

are set up by people like me to protect us and our interests from those who have every reason to be angry about us prospering off their suffering.

For the victims of this systemic crucifixion, the sight of Jesus on the cross matters. For those on whose necks the crucifying knee is pressed, the message that God was in Jesus as he was crushed by brutal forces deployed to protect the interests of the empire is a message that speaks a word of solidarity. They hear that God is with them in their suffering. They hear that their suffering is known to God.

But many of them rightly ask whether that is enough. How is God's solidarity with their suffering supposed to be good news if nothing changes, if year after year they and their loved ones go on dying under the knees of the crucifying powers? What good is the death of Jesus if it is just one more unjust death and it doesn't even slow the rate of such deaths, let alone usher in an age of justice?

And for most of us, living comfortably under the protection of the crucifying powers, the death of Jesus on the cross is not even a sign of solidarity with our basic realities. If our eyes are open and we are honest about it, when we stand at the foot of the cross, the person we can probably relate to most is not the dying Jesus, but the Roman centurion. That moment of horrible realisation, when he goes, "Shit! This bloke was fair dinkum the Son of God, and I've just killed him! I mean, I was just doing my job, but somehow that entangled me in a brutal system that used me to crush the life out of the Son of God."

This is not pleasant, but if we have the guts to stay with the experience of the centurion at the foot of the cross, we might arrive at the truth that can set us free. But it begins in a place we don't want to go, in the eye opening moment when we realise who we are, people who are enmeshed in systems that spin a web of lies to cover up the ways we condone and benefit from the crucifying powers. It is a moment of terrifying guilt and fear where we realise what we have done and who we have become and how many human lives have been crucified in our name.

In that moment, we might realise too how the system we have built is cannibalising us, how this empire of privilege that claims to be protecting us is actually swallowing up us too, and dehumanising us, turning us into blind minions of the crucifying powers.

On its own, that's where the crucifixion leaves us. That's why the crucifixion, on its own, can never be good news. Nobody is saved by the crucifixion of Jesus. His death is just one more ugly death among millions down through the years, an endless repeating narrative. Most of the world can identify with the crucified one, and the rest of us might reluctantly recognise ourselves in the crucifier centurion, but none of us are saved by this crucifixion; we are simply unmasked by it.

And if that's where we're left, there is no good news in that. No hope, and no salvation.

We try to do the right thing, and at least give Jesus a decent burial, unlike those poor souls in mass graves in Bucha. So we turn up at the graveyard to do what decent people do, and suddenly that endless repeating narrative is rudely interrupted. There is no dead body here. The grave is abandoned. And angels tell us to stop looking for the living among the dead.

Stop expecting life and salvation to be found at the cross, or under the knee, or in a mass grave. The death of even the most perfect victim won't save you from becoming the next one.

Remember what he told you, the angels say. He told you that the crucifying powers would get him in the end, but that the end would not be the end, for three days later he would rise to new life. You should look for him and follow him for sure, but not here in the places of death, at the cross and the grave.

If you want to find life, to find life and hope and salvation, follow him now as he heads away from the cross and the grave, follow him on the path that starts there but leads into the wide open spaces of new life and love.

Here we are folks, still a lot like those women in the story we heard read tonight. We now know where Jesus is not, but we're still not too sure where he is or exactly what following him there is going to look like. And just like those women, we know that even other followers of Jesus will struggle to believe us when we say we've caught the sound of God laughing in the face of crucifying powers. No wonder so few believe it when even those who have most believed it have had to say like Moses and like Martin Luther King, "I might not live to see that promised land with you, but I know its coming."

We might still be searching for his footprints, but the grave is empty and Jesus is leading the way to that promised land. And what that land will look like to those who've been crucified or been crushed under a knee or thrown into a mass grave is a new land of justice where all lives matter equally, and where any threat to the health, wellbeing and happiness of black lives or queer lives or broken lives is responded to with the same urgency and resources as the Queen's covid scare.

And what that land will look like to those who've been hollowed and dehumanised by constantly benefitting from the crucifying powers, is unexpected and undeserved and utterly overwhelming forgiveness and a clear pathway out of that enslavement and into the ways of generous unbounded love.

Even if we had no idea what we were doing, we've rehearsed this journey in our baptisms, as we enacted being buried with Christ in order that we might be raised with Christ to a life that is utterly and impossibly new. It was not a bath to clean us off and make a few socially acceptable improvements. What we rehearsed was a drowning of the life that most of us here had been deceived into thinking was fine, and a rising to a life that is earth-shatteringly new.

And this sermon feels as unfinished as the gospel story we heard, which ended with Peter joining the women in seeing that the grave was empty but not yet knowing what to make of it all or what might come of it all. But the sermon doesn't need to have all the answers, because the answers are in the living, not the talking, and so now we are going to move on to celebrating our common baptism into this new story, and welcoming some new members who are choosing to throw their lot in with us as we all rise from the waters and follow this new life together in hope-fuelled defiance of every crucifying power.