

Year B Easter Day

Acts 10:34-43 1 Corinthians 15:1-11 John 20: 1-18

Today is the most important day of the year for Christians, not least because as St Paul reminds us in the verses that follow on from our reading from 1 Corinthians that if Christ did not rise from the dead, we are to be pitied more than anybody and that our faith is futile.

Fortunately for us there are several hundred eyewitnesses who attest to the fact that they saw Jesus in the flesh after he died on the Cross on Good Friday, and therefore our faith is not futile. It is Jesus' resurrection that gives us hope that there is a better future, that God will ultimately work things out for the good.

This morning, I want to talk about nature, including gardens, caterpillars and butterflies, but I want to start with darkness. Creation started in darkness before God created light. John in his opening to his Gospel, describes Jesus as the life that gives light, the light that shines in the darkness, and which is not overcome by the darkness.

And then we come to the everything that surrounds Easter – Jesus is arrested in the dark, Peter denies him in the dark, Matthew, Mark and Luke all tell us there was darkness over the land for three hours between noon and 3 o'clock as Jesus hung dying on the cross, Jesus was buried in the dark and he was resurrected in the dark, and according to John it was still dark when Mary Magdalene went to Jesus' tomb.

We don't know how the resurrection happened and we never will, it is the great holy mystery. It exceeds our capacity to pin it down, whether we believe it to be physical and literal, as I do, or whether, as others believe, it is a metaphor for transformation, for renewal, for rebirth. Whatever your beliefs, whatever the resurrection was and is, its fullness lies in darkness. All we can say is that in the darkness God worked to bring life out of death. As the Anglican priest and poet Malcolm Guite put it so beautifully in a recent sonnet – between Good Friday and Easter Day the tomb becomes a womb.

And that is true in a wider sense too for most of us, isn't it. We have all had our own moments of darkness that feel unbearable, that we don't understand, and yet, somehow, something stirs and something new is created and comes to life. That doesn't mean we can, or even want to, forget, or even stop grieving what

has happened. But it does mean that emerging through the darkness is light and hope. Jesus' resurrection shows us that darkness doesn't have to have the last word. Rather, his resurrection shows that God will have the last word and also that love is stronger than death.

As we emerge into spring, we can see that a lot has been going on in the dark over the winter, what has died back in our gardens is springing into life again despite all the rain and the general lack of sunshine.

I don't know if you've noticed, and I hadn't until I came across this observation in the Church Times this week, but John is the only Gospel writer to say that both the betrayal of Jesus and his resurrection took place in a garden. Mark and Matthew refer to Gethsemane as the place where Jesus prayed with the disciples before the arrival of Judas, and Luke writes of Jesus going to the Mount of Olives, but only John identifies the place as a garden. And only John, in his version of Peter's denial, has someone asking Peter, "Did I not see you in the garden?"

Similarly, the other Gospel writers all just refer to the women going to the tomb early in the morning without giving us any idea of where it was. Only John says it is in a garden.

The Old Testament is littered with references to gardens, starting obviously with Garden of Eden in Genesis but gardens are also frequently mentioned in books such as the Songs of Songs, Isaiah, and Ezekiel.

But it is at the resurrection where John completes his garden symbolism. Not only is Jesus's tomb in the garden, but Mary also mistakes Jesus for the gardener, and it is only when Jesus replies that she realises who he really is.

Yet the reality is that God has been a gardener from the very beginning, and Jesus is also a gardener just like his father. And that's a good thing because gardens are not natural. Left to themselves gardens would soon become swamped by weeds and straggly shrubs and lose any sense of design and order. Gardens require us to work with nature, to nurture nature, to tend it, trim it, support it in all sorts of ways.

So, it is with God and us. Left to our own devices we would run riot and grow wild, which is why God prunes us, to help us grow into a thing of beauty and to bear fruit. It is the gardener who has responsibility for helping the garden to

flourish and bear fruit. In his great discourse at the Last Supper John tells us that Jesus describes himself as the vine and his disciples as the branches. He could equally have said that he was the gardener, and they were the garden.

Talking of growing into a thing of beauty leads me on to caterpillars and butterflies, which we all look forward to seeing every summer. Did you know, and I also learned this from this week's Church Times, that every cell in a caterpillar is transformed and repurposed to enable it to become a butterfly?

As Catherine Fox, the novelist and bishop's wife, rather wittily put it, the caterpillar effectively turns into caterpillar custard when it liquefies inside the chrysalis. Luckily there are a few clusters of cells that survive this process, which are pre-coded to become legs, antennae and wings. The point at which the adult butterfly emerges from the chrysalis is known as the imago.

Just as nothing can destroy the butterfly's DNA that leads to the imago, so nothing can destroy the imago dei, or the image of God, in our own spiritual DNA. And that same coding runs through the entire cosmos.

And that gives us real hope. Just as nothing could destroy Jesus, not even death, ultimately there is nothing capable of destroying God's handiwork, however grim the world looks right now, for all the wars, all the violence, for all the risks and problems associated with climate change, let alone all the other crises that are too numerous to mention.

Earlier in his letter to the Corinthians Paul penned his famous words on love. It ended with these words, 'And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.'

It was faith, hope, and love that drew Mary to the tomb on that dark morning. And it is the resurrection of Jesus, the most astonishing event in human history, that enables us to live in faith, hope and love both today of all days but also every day.