

SERMON – Midwives of Hope – St George’s Anglican, April 24

In Luke’s account of the resurrection, the first eyewitnesses to arrive at the empty tomb are – Mary Magalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James and a few other unnamed women. They were all companions of Jesus from Galilee and had followed him to the cross. They carefully watched which tomb his body was laid in so that they could return with burial spices and perfumes. They did this at great risk to themselves as Jesus was a convicted political criminal who had just been crucified. The guards posted at the tomb could easily have reported their identities to the authorities who were trying to stamp out this ‘Jesus movement’.

The women had come not without fear, the gospel story tells us, but out of love and faith, they had been there at the beginning of his ministry and they were determined to be there at the end by honouring his body with the spices and perfumes.

The women play it safe and arrive at Jesus’ tomb at the crack of dawn. They were puzzled to find the huge stone which had protected the tomb, rolled away and with no guards to be found.

At the arrival of two glowing strangers, it’s no surprise the women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground to as an act of subservience. They could not make sense of the empty tomb or the arrival of these angelic visitors. For, the women were still living in a good Friday world when Sunday had come.

- Everyone knows you don’t see angels in a good Friday world; you only see strangers.
- You don’t feel comfort in a good Friday world; you only feel threat.

- You don't greet people with kindness in a good Friday world; you only peer at them through eyes dimmed by suspicion and mistrust.
- When you live only in a good Friday world, when that is your only perspective and your eyes have gotten used to the dark and you're crying over a stolen body, a stolen hope, a stolen promise
- Then everyone you meet is not a potential friend, but rather a potential thief. Even two angels sitting in an empty tomb.

The Angel's reminder of Jesus words about his own death and resurrection, brings them to their senses.

"And then they remembered".

The women's faithfulness and courage had brought them to this profound moment in human history, to bear witnesses to Jesus's resurrection. They thought they were turning up to honour the dead but in fact they were attending a birth. The birth of a new world and a new hope for humanity.

They rush to tell the 11 disciples their news only to be told they were talking nonsense. Despite the fact that they weren't believed, these women can rightly be called 'midwives of hope'.

What is the hope that the resurrection brings?

The physical resurrection of Jesus assures us that Jesus is the **Son of God**, as God alone has the power to raise someone from the dead.

- The Son of a God who destroyed the power of death and opened the door for eternal life.
- The Son of God whose death on the cross made possible the forgiveness of our sins so that we could be restored to a right relationship with God.

- The Son of God who is making all things new. Not just humanity but all of creation. A creation which had been groaning with labour pains for release from the overwhelming corruption, decay and death that it has been subject to.
- The Son of God who was and is victorious over the principalities and powers who have deceived us and destroyed us.

Why might we need to follow the women's example and be midwives of hope?

So many lives in our world are impoverished without the hope the resurrection offers. So many of our friends, family and colleagues are struggling in the dark to find meaning and significance in all the wrong places. So many are weighed down by the burden of life and are in despair.

And yet, so many have reacted in the same way as the 11 disciples to the gospel that the women carried. The 'resurrection' sounds so preposterous, so ridiculous, it is dismissed as nonsense, particularly when it is delivered by such unqualified and humble people as the women who followed Jesus.

You see, by the time we've reached adulthood, we have all been wounded by betrayal, abuse, broken promises, broken relationships, and empty words. There is enough disillusionment in us to make us say when someone presents us with the possibility of new life, "Why should I trust you? Why should I believe this? Why will anything be different this time? The older we get, the harder it is to trust and the easier it is to become sceptical and cynical.

Yet I believe, none of us wants to be this way. Something inside us wants to trust, to hope, to believe in the goodness of

God. We'd like to trust, but often we can't give birth to it. It is a painful struggle to give birth to trust again and, in that struggle, a midwife of hope, someone who believes in the resurrection, can indeed be a wonderful friend.

What is the role of a midwife? And how can we be midwives of hope?

A midwife works alongside a mother to deliver her baby. She will be checking on the mother & baby's progress, guiding the mother through labour, reassuring her, telling her what's normal and giving her the specialist care she needs. She offers mental, physical and emotional support long before the birth. In my case, the midwife of our first child, Zachary, established a new parent's group which has provided Chris and I with lifelong friends.

I needed a midwife with serious skills for the birth of our second child, Oscar. A serious back injury in the weeks before my due date meant we had to leave the textbook behind and find an option that would enable me to give birth without further damaging my back. Two days after Oscar was born the orthopaedic surgeon recommended surgery that evening, leaving us in a quandary as to my post operative care. I needed to be in the orthopaedic ward but that was no place for a newborn vulnerable to infection and in need of constant care and attention. Our wonderful midwife negotiated a solution where I went up to the orthopaedic ward and our baby Oscar was joined overnight in the maternity ward by my 65-year-old mother. My husband Chris will never forget the shock on the other new mothers faces in the maternity ward when the breakfast trolley arrived the next morning and my elderly grey haired mother trotted out of her room with Oscar in her arms.

What will it take for us to be spiritual midwives of hope in our families, communities and workplaces?

First of all, we need to embody the hope Jesus has given us by remaining open, to surprise, newness and freshness in our lives, whether we're feeling enthusiastic or not. Because hope based on the resurrection is not simply a feeling, or a mood. It is a choice, a decision, an action based on faith. Jim Wallis of Sojourners, says:

- Hope is the very dynamic of history.
- Hope is the engine of change
- Hope is the energy of transformation.
- Hope is the door from one reality to another. From a good Friday world to a Easter Sunday one.

For it is hope that shook the Roman Empire and established the Christian movement. It is the hope expressed in the songs of slaves in Egypt and the Mississippi that led to end of slavery. And it was the hope of Nelson Mandela that led to South Africa's peaceful transition to a new nation and the end of apartheid.

Secondly, every day is a new day with infinite possibilities. We need to believe that no matter our age, mistakes, betrayals, wounds, and deaths – we can begin each day afresh, innocent again, a child, stunned at the newness of it all. No matter what we've done, our future is forever pregnant with wonderful new possibilities. Why? Because this is the nature of our God.

G K Chesterton says it best,

It is possible that God says every morning, "Do it again" to the sun and every evening "Do it again" to the moon.

It may not be automatic necessity that makes all daisies alike;

It may be that God makes every daisy separately but has never grown tired of making them.

It may be that he has the eternal appetite of infancy;

For we have grown old and our Father is younger than we.

Thirdly, Jesus showed us that the resurrection comes by way of a cross. Suffering and hope are always joined in human history. The cost of moving from good Friday to easter Sunday – in our personal lives and in history – is always great. Christians are not guaranteed a smooth ride, unaccountability bad things still happen to good people.

However, good and truth will ultimately triumph, as revealed in Revelation 21:

³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ⁴ ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’^[b] or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

⁵ He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!”

But this triumph must be waited for, not because God wants us to endure pain as some kind of test, but because God, unlike ourselves, doesn’t use coercion or violence to achieve an aim. God only uses love, truth, beauty, and goodness.

And finally, a midwife is never the lead actor, she listens, assists, guides, connects and advocates but never takes over. She respects that every baby is different so each birth will be different.

We, like the midwives, are not the hope,
we are the bearers of the hope, who,
day after day,
irrespective of how we are feeling,
or our circumstances are,
midwife hope to our friends, families, and communities,
confident,
that this hope is ultimately grounded in an empty
tomb,
a risen Saviour and a command,
first issued to a group of women,
to go and tell the good news.