

SERMON EASTER SUNDAY 2024

My message today on this Resurrection Hope Sunday is simple and straightforward.

Have faith in our Christian Faith. Stay firm in our conviction that the Way and the truth of Jesus Christ, the kingdom of God Way, truly is the hope for our troubled world.

Why do I say this? **Because something is stirring.**

It's felt very much for the longest time that in Western culture, the tide of Christianity has been going out and disappearing over the horizon. Culture has been very happy to put Christ in the tomb of irrelevance. But there a resurrection spirit in the air. **Is the tide of Christianity beginning to come in?**

At various points throughout this past year, here at St G's we've talked about, and shown examples of prominent voices, with large cultural audiences speaking about their newfound openness to God and the Christian faith.

So on this resurrection morning I want to start with a video clip I stumbled across that again speaks into this shift. It's a clip of a man called Joe Rogan and I'm showing it for 3 pertinent reasons.

- (1) Joe Rogan has the most listened-to podcast in the world with around 11 million listeners per episode. To give you a perspective, the most popular show in Aotearoa NZ is **Country Calendar** with half a million people. So 11 million listeners is a very significant amount of people tuning in to cultural conversations.
- (2) The clip has provoked many a conversation far and wide because Rogan has typically described himself as resolute agnostic.
- (3) Because what Rogan articulates in this clip, really does capture the heartbeat of what so many other people are beginning to think and express.

PLAY CLIP

For me, Rogan puts his finger on the pulse of a deep truth about this cultural moment with those words. **"As time rolls on people are going to understand the need to have some sort of divine structure to things. A belief in the sanctity of love and of truth. We need divine guidelines if we are to live a just and righteousness life.**

What these words articulate is what many are increasingly sensing and recognising.

That the real crisis of this cultural moment, isn't cultural, political or even environmental.

It's a spiritual crisis. And what's driving this spirit of dislocation and fracture is that we've become disconnected from the Divine story, the Divine structure we are actually created *for*.

As we've said many times, the great human experiment of going it alone without God isn't working and something is stirring.

Which brings me to the core of my message today.

Why the sea change? Why the shift in the tide?

WHY, despite the best efforts of the West to put Jesus in the tomb and keep Him there, the stone keeps rolling away and the Risen Christ is refusing to stay dead. Clearly there's something

profoundly meaningful about the events of Easter. There's something about the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ that just keeps striking a deep chord in the hearts and minds of humanity. So on this Resurrection Sunday, I want to give three offerings of WHY the sea change, and they are all wrapped up in the first resurrection conversations at the empty tomb.

Let's start the very first conversation between the angels and Mary in today's Gospel of John.

In scripture, angels are seen as Divine Messengers from the Divine realm. The realm of the 'unseen' breaks into the realm of the 'seen' and they impart to us Godly wisdom.

So how telling, is the very first question from the angels to Mary, for today's cultural moment.

¹³ ***"Dear woman, why are you crying?"*** Doesn't this divine question speak into the sorrow and the grief many of us are feeling at the state of the world we see. **Dear humanity, why are you crying?** And what's Mary's reply?

"Because they have taken away my Lord, and I don't know where they have put him."

I believe that one of the strongest currents in the sea change we are seeing, is that people are now beginning to recognise that the Lord has been taken away from every part of our lives and our culture... and it's left us spiritually impoverished. I feel it deep in my own bones. It feels like there's an angelic presence whispering to all of us, 'we've let go of Christ at our peril.' Deep in our spirit we know that we've lost something very precious.

And again, Joe Rogan in that video clip put his finger on **one of the reasons why** we've taken the Lord from the soul of our culture.

"Unfortunately, a lot of intelligent people dismiss all the positive aspects of religion because they think the stories are mere superstitious fairytales that have no place in this modern world."

And I've had my own personal experience of this truth very recently. Every week on my own Facebook I communicate what's happening here at St George's and it's always a tad amusing to see the comments this attracts. Last week I put up our Easter services and in the comments section I got 6 'Amens' and this one.- ***"People do not come back from the dead. You are delusional if you believe that. I live my life by the truth of science. To believe in something without evidence is irrational."***

Now I sent the guy a gracious reply, and I even get the perspective. I shared some of this viewpoint until I came to faith late in life.

But for me, this is part of the sea change we're seeing. And it's significant!

There's a growing realisation, that if we ONLY see and experience our lives through a **purely** rational, science-based lens and consciousness ... this is a limited expression of what it means to be human.

There's a growing realisation that St Paul has got it right. "We live and move and have our being in **both** the 'seen and the unseen' realms. The temporary and the Eternal. The 'purely seen' is just **one part** of the full reality.

For so long in the West, the primary driver has been ... ***"we will only believe it if we can see it and measure it in a laboratory"***. But there is more to reality and the human experience than what can be measured and proven in a lab.

How can we possibly measure the transforming power and force of ‘**grace, forgiveness and love**’ in a laboratory? But what we do **know** and **see**, is that when we experience the power of its transforming influence, lives are changed.

This is what Good Friday; the Cross and our Resurrection Hope is all about.

It’s the power of the Eternal invading the here and now, in the form of sacrificial love. And it’s redeeming, transforming power, has literally changed the entire course of humanity.

**Which brings me to my second offering of why the sea change.
And I take this from the second conversation at the empty tomb.**

Have you ever noticed that the very first words of the Risen Christ to Mary are exactly the same words of the angels to Mary? ¹⁵ *“Dear woman, why are you crying?”* But then Jesus adds his own telling question for this cultural moment. *“Who are you looking for?”*

One of the core heartbeats of this Spiritual crisis, is that there are so many people who are **looking and searching** for meaning, purpose and hope. **Looking** for a divine structure by which to live their lives.

What’s deeply revealing in this resurrection encounter is that Mary doesn’t immediately recognise Jesus. She thinks He’s the gardener. **So what does Jesus do, that enables Mary to recognise that He, the risen Christ is in her presence?** Jesus calls her personally by her name.

What’s been so fascinating about so many of these high-profile public conversions is how many of them speak of powerful experience of Christ calling them by name. **And one of these, is this man, Tom Holland.**

Holland is a world-renowned historian whose bestselling book DOMINION pointed out how the 1st-century Christian revolution has shaped the whole trajectory of the West’s moral imagination. He makes the fundamental point that all those who would call themselves secular humanists and atheists are actually swimming in the very waters of Christianity.

But on writing the book, Tom Holland surprised Himself (and all those who knew him) by finding himself drawn to Christianity. **But here’s the telling apart.**

The real transformation came when he encountered a profound experience in an abandoned church while filming a documentary in northern Iraq. The church had been complete desecrated by the Islamic State. And as he was searching among the rubble, he discovered a shattered picture of the Annunciation – the Virgin Mary being visited by the angel Gabriel.

And it was at this moment that Holland says he experienced a ‘thin place’ between heaven and earth. The veil between the seen and the unseen realm was lifted, and He felt the sense of a divine presence. And this presence has never left him. And I love this quote he gives. *“The moment you accept that there are angels, then suddenly the world just seems richer and more interesting.”*

Which brings me to the third and final offering of why the tide is turning in the hearts and minds of cultures consciousness.

And for this one I go to Luke's account of the resurrection and the first question by the angles to the women at the tomb. Because once again it's a very telling question for our cultural moment.

Why are you looking for the living among the dead?

People are beginning to sense that we've been looking for meaning, purpose and hope in the wrong places. Material consumerism isn't giving us 'true life'. The wealthiest countries materially, seem to be the most impoverished spiritually. They have the some of the highest rates of addiction, anxiety, and unhappiness.

But I do believe that the Holy Spirit, (the Spirit of the risen Christ in the world), is on the move. **That something is stirring in the hearts and minds of culture's consciousness?**

People are sensing that we've been looking in the wrong places and it's stolen our spirit of joy. People are sensing that this feeling of dislocation and fracture is because we've cut ourselves off from the very source of all that brings life.

People are hungry for sense of connection to the Spiritual and the divine.
To experience and encounter the Living God.

And I'll finish with this.

Just last night as I was lying in bed, I was wondering ... Is there really a shift in the tide or is it all in my imagination.

At just at that moment, I received a Facebook message from a friend in the UK who I haven't spoken to for a few months. He sent me this FBook post by Pete Greig he of Lectio 365 and 24/7 prayer. Pete Greig was recommending an article by Justin Brierley a well-known Christian podcaster who's just written a book called... **The Surprising Rebirth of Belief in God.**

What's it about. It's about how he (Justin Brierly) has noticed that something is stirring in culture. There's whole lot of people he's noticed who are saying, "you know, I think we need Jesus". It felt like a divine visitation to me. A divine message to say, go preach it brother.

So on this resurrection morning I finish as I started.

Have faith in our Christian faith.

Stay firm in your conviction that the Way and truth of the Risen Christ, the kingdom of God Way, truly is the HOPE for our troubled worlds.

Because the good news is that in the hearts and minds of many, something is stirring.

Christ is risen, he is risen indeed, and yes, we need Jesus.