

Thought for the Week Easter Day 4th April 2021

READING

Matthew 28 English Standard Version Anglicised

¹ Now after the Sabbath, towards the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. ² And behold, there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. ³ His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. ⁴ And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men. ⁵ But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. ⁶ He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he^[a] lay. ⁷ Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him. See, I have told you." ⁸ So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹ And behold, Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshipped him. ¹⁰ Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me."

Two significant dates fall one day after the other this year. Today the 4th April 2021, is, of course, Easter Sunday. And tomorrow is ... yes, I know it's Easter Monday and a holiday for everyone ... but it's the 5th April - the last day of the tax year. Today we celebrate the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ and tomorrow we have to "render unto Caesar ... - or perhaps I should say, "render unto Richi the things that Richi's."

I'm sure you've heard the saying, "*The only things guaranteed in life are death and taxes.*" Well, I'm not so sure that that statement is absolutely true. For a start, if you don't earn much money you may be under the tax threshold. On the other hand, with enough deductions, loopholes, and a very good "creative" accountant, you could avoid paying most, if not all, of your taxes. I'm fairly sure I've heard of someone famous who did that recently. So, there's no guarantee there. That leaves us with death to deal with. I believe that Easter Sunday tells us that death is not guaranteed, either.

Four friends were talking about death. One of them asked the other three, "When you are in your coffin and people are at the wake, mourning you, what would you like to hear them say about you?" The first man said, "I'd like to hear them say that I was a fine doctor in my time and a great family man." The second one said, "I'd like to hear that I was a wonderful husband and a wonderful teacher who made a huge difference in the lives of many children." The third man replied, "I'd like to hear them say, 'I think I saw some movement in there!'"

You know, I think most of us can relate to that last fellow, but I can think of something far better I'd like someone to say if I were lying in a coffin. If this life is that there is, then death is something we would like to put off. Actually, I'd like to hear the words that Jesus spoke to Martha after her brother Lazarus had died. He said, "*I am the resurrection and the life. He*

who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die." Friends, the resurrection, death being defeated, is at the heart of Christianity - and it's all because of what happened that first Easter Sunday.

Yes, of course, we Christians absolutely believe that our faith makes a difference in this life and that in Jesus' name we can do great things and love and serve other people, but the best thing about Christianity is the hope it gives that our physical death will not be the end. Thanks to Jesus dying on the cross in our place and rising again triumphant over death, we can and we will experience eternal life. I'm thankful that when I conduct a funeral service for a person who believed, I can say, "Death has not won. Death was defeated on the cross and this is just the beginning of life eternal for this person in heaven.

A three-year-old girl, Nicole, was just as anxious for Easter to come as she had been for Christmas to arrive. One day as Nicole and her father doing the shopping she once again said, "I can't wait for Easter Daddy!" Her dad asked, "Do you know what Easter means?" "Yes," she replied. "Well, what does Easter mean?" her dad went on. In her own sweet three-year-old way, with her arms raised and a big smile on her face at the top of her voice she shouted, "Surprise!"

What better word could sum up the meaning of Easter! Surprise, death! Surprise, sin! Surprise, mourning disciples! Surprise, modern-day people! Surprise, powers of evil! Christ is risen! He's alive!" Yes, death has been defeated. Question: What is the date of death's birth? Answer - the moment Adam & Eve sinned. Scripture tells us: "...by one man sin entered into the world and death by sin.". If death was born in the Garden of Eden, what then is the date of death's demise? It's Easter day, of course! Right back in the Genesis 3 account of death's birth we are told the nature of death's death as well. It's part of the Christmas story read every year at Nine Lessons & Carols Services. The Lord says to Satan (in the guise of a serpent or snake) "... he will crush your head and you will strike his heel....."

In an Easter Morning comic strip by Jonny Hart, Peter is rushing to the tomb having heard from the women the news that Jesus body wasn't there. When he gets to the tomb, he sees the stone rolled away and together with John he examines the empty tomb. As they are leaving Peter sees some footprints in the dirt and begins to follow them. As he does he comes across a snake which is thrashing about, obviously recovering from some sort of trauma. The snake says, "Well, that was very rude! . . .Some guy has just stepped on my head."

OK, I know that's not in the Gospel accounts - but you get the idea and I hope, the message. Satan thought he had won when Jesus died - that he had more than "*bruised his heel.*" And if the stone not been rolled away; if Jesus been left in the tomb to rot; if Jesus not risen from the dead, then sin would indeed have won. But the stone has been rolled away. Jesus did step on the head of the snake. He not only stepped on it, he crushed the life out of it. Sin no longer rules our lives. Sin has been defeated. He is risen.

A little boy whose Daddy was a grave digger heard the story of Jesus on Easter Sunday and asked his Sunday School teacher, "Do you mean that Jesus really did rise up from the dead?" "Oh, yes," his Sunday School teacher said, "He definitely did!" The boy shook his head. "Well, I'm glad my daddy didn't bury Him, or He'd never have got up again!"

The story goes that a letter from the D.H.S.S. was addressed to someone who had died. It read: "To whom it may concern: Dear Sir, Your benefits will be stopped effective immediately, because we have received notice that you passed away. You may, however, reapply if there is a change in your circumstances." Regardless of what that little boy thought about his daddy's skills, there's only one person I know of who has had that kind of "change of circumstances," and that is Jesus Christ!

That first Easter morning the two Marys saw the same Jesus who had been dead on Good Friday and He was ALIVE! I'm sure that if you or I have been there we would have felt "*fear and great joy*," too. Notice that Matthew tells us that the women experienced "*fear and great joy*," NOT great fear and joy. The great joy enabled them to overcome their fear and run to tell the others what they had seen and heard, because they also had faith. Without faith, who could believe this incredible story?

Even with faith, sometimes our fear keeps us from experiencing great joy. Two Roman soldiers are guarding Jesus' tomb on the first Easter morning and the sun is just coming over the horizon. One is encouraging the other. "Cheer up, it's Sunday morning. The way I see it, we've got one more day of guarding this tomb. By Monday this whole thing will have blown over." The world is amazed that millions of Christians still celebrate Easter with such joy. Like those guards at the tomb, the world assumes that "By Monday the whole thing will blow over." But it doesn't. You see, we have good reason to be joyful not just for one day. God loves us, we are forgiven. For many people, Easter is just another holiday, a couple of days off work. For others, it's bunny rabbits and hunting Easter eggs. For others, it's just another ghost story they don't believe. BUT WE KNOW BETTER! For believers in Christ, Easter means the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead! It means the promise of life after death because Jesus conquered the grave! It means hope of a better life. It means joy, not sorrow.

In 1989, an 8.2 earthquake hit Armenia, killing over 30,000 people in less than four minutes. It's hard to imagine the pain, and suffering. In the twinkling of an eye, worlds were shaken and lives crushed. Surprisingly, such tragedies often bring out the best in people. In the midst of chaos and destruction, a man rushed to his son's school. But instead of a school, he found a shapeless heap of rubble. Imagine what went through his mind.

What would have gone through your mind? Perhaps, shock? But in the case of this father, the sight of rubble and ruin only made him spring into action. He ran to the back corner of the building where his son's classroom used to be and began to dig. Why? What real hope did he have? What were the chances that his son could have survived such destruction? All he knew was that he had made a promise to always be there for his boy. It was this promise that animated his hands and motivated his heart.

As he began to dig, well-meaning parents tried to pull him out of the rubble saying: "It's too late!" "They're all dead!" "You can't help!" "Go home!" "There's nothing you can do!" Then a fireman tried to pull him off the rubble by saying, "Fires and explosions are happening everywhere. You're in danger. Go home!" Finally, the police came and said, "You're angry, distraught, but it's over. You're endangering others. Go home. We'll handle it!" But he continued to dig for eight . . . 12 . . . 24 . . . 36 hours. Then, in the 38th hour, he pulled back a boulder and heard a little voice. Immediately, he screamed, "ARMAND!" Back came the words, "Dad!?" I told them! I told the other kids that if you were still alive, you'd save me! You promised me,

you'd always be here for me! You did it, dad!" A determined father, a promise kept, and a stone rolled away to reveal life and give freedom.

The story of Armand's dad reminds us of the events of that first Easter when the Heavenly Father kept an even greater promise by rolling away a much more difficult stone. With the rolling away of that stone, came eternal life, and true lasting freedom in Christ! And you know what? Our Heavenly Father is still in the business of rolling away stones. The decisive event in human history was the resurrection of Christ, where death and evil were defeated.

Hallelujah! Christ is risen.

PCI Let's Pray

Hope at Easter

As we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus, give thanks for the message of hope this brings. We pray for hope for the future, as we look ahead into another uncertain year. We trust in God for his guidance and provision as we travel this way.

Pray for our political leaders in both jurisdictions. Pray for political stability, and confident, principled leadership from our governments. Pray for the grace to disagree well. Pray strongly against those who would bully or intimidate those with whom they differ.

Young People have lost so much this past year. Pray that as we progress, churches and ministry organisations will be able to provide them physically, emotionally and spiritually restoring experiences.

Pray for children and families as life returns to a more normal routine in coming months. Give thanks for families growing in faith together this last year and ask that they continue to follow Jesus every day.

Middle East

Give thanks that JETS continues to provide training for church and para-church leaders, award Christian theological degrees and contribute to the planting and strengthening of churches throughout the Middle East. Pray for staff as they work to keep students engaged with their courses during online learning.

Indonesia

Give thanks for the launch of a new speed boat partially funded by a grant from PCI to help one of our partner churches reach its many members located in remote locations across the North Moluccas islands.

Rev Graham Stockdale (Prison Chaplain in Maghaberry)

Pray for Graham and all involved in PCI's prison chaplaincy work. Pray for opportunities to share the gospel and for prisoners to find hope and new life in Christ.

Great Victoria Street, Belfast

Pray for the congregation of Great Victoria Street which was glad to meet together in-person on Easter Sunday. Pray for the minister, Rev William Harkness, the kirk session and members as they seek God's guidance, pray and plan for the future of the congregation's work in Belfast city centre

Social Witness

Pray for those living with mental health issues at this time, which are exasperated greatly by the loneliness and isolation of the current Covid-19 crisis. Pray that they will find a listening ear and seek the appropriate professional help. Give thanks for all who give of their time to provide Mental Health Services.

Training in Ministry

Ministry students have had a busy semester. Teaching has been online, and many have faced additional demands with home-schooling, disrupted routines, and isolation. Pray for them and their families that they will have opportunity for refreshment over Easter, with a clear focus on the hope of our Lord's resurrection.