

## Easter Day, Year C

Isaiah 65.17-25 • Psalm 118.1-2,14-24\* • 1 Corinthians 15.19-26  
• John 20.1-18

Christ Church, Chelsea

17 April 2022

Sam Hole

What kind of triumph?

*'In fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.'*

There are many ways of celebrating a triumph. When Sam Waley-Cohen crossed the line in the Grand National last weekend – the 50-1 outsider coming in as a surprise winner – his immediate reaction seemed to be one of shock. In the interview that followed as he sat on his horse, he was admirably articulate. But his face spoke of someone still processing a victory that was surely his dream since childhood.

Today – Easter Day – marks a triumph of sorts. That's front and centre in our hymns. 'Jesus Christ is risen to-day, / our triumphant holy day' we sang at the start of the service. And at the end of the service we will belt out possibly the greatest Easter hymn: 'Thine be the glory, risen, conquering Son, / endless is the vict'ry thou o'er death hast won.' The mood is one of triumph: a decisive victory has been won.

And indeed, Easter is a triumph. It's a triumph that is reflected at what might seem like the darkest times of life – that is, at funerals. When at the very end of the funeral service we commit someone's body to be buried or cremated, our prayer runs:

We have entrusted our *sister Jean* to God's mercy,  
and we now commit *her* body to the ground:  
earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust:  
in sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life  
through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Death is not the end. In the light of Easter we hope in the resurrection to eternal life through Christ who, in the beautiful ending of the prayer, 'will transform our frail bodies that they may be conformed to his glorious body'.

And yet, as we well know, funerals are not a time for celebratory trumpet fanfares. Yes, it is a first founding principle of our Easter faith that death is not the end; we will meet again in a place where 'mourning and crying and pain will be no more'. But as Christians we hold that hope alongside a second, far more painful, principle: death is a real ending from which there is no return. It's pretty much the opposite sentiment of the reading you sometimes hear at funerals; the reading that assures us that 'death is nothing at all', and is just a matter of 'slipping into the next room'. Death marks an ending – an event which we are right to mourn and mark with all its pain and sadness.

So how do we hold together those two aspects of death: the pain of death as a parting forever in this life, set alongside the hope of resurrection?

Sit back in our armchair at a moment far removed from the immediate pain of losing a loved one, and we might value the apostle Paul's reflections in today's New Testament reading. Christ's resurrection, Paul insists, has begun a new order of things. But the crucial word here is 'begun'. 'As all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.' 'But', continues Paul, 'each in his own order.' And Paul then lays out his summary, in line with other apocalyptic passages in the New Testament, of an order to the future end of the world during which time Christ will judge the world righteously, putting an end to all the enemies of holiness. And, Paul concludes, 'the last enemy to be destroyed is death.' In his resurrection Christ has triumphed over death; a new order of things is breaking in. But, Paul recognises, in this world, in this life, the pain will remain. Death will be destroyed – but it will be the last enemy to fall into nothingness; the end of death will mark the end of this beautiful but broken creation as we know it.

That's Paul, making some intellectual sense of events which will always in this life elude our full understanding. But perhaps, as we grapple with what kind of triumph Easter is, our hearts will be moved more by those earliest resurrection stories. Ponder Mary

Magdalene at the empty tomb in the dim dawn light; and then Peter and John joining her and faintly starting to realise what has taken place. Consider Mary weeping in the garden, and in Jesus's single word 'Mary' – just as we might long to hear our departed loved ones call us by name one more time – in hearing her name, Mary finding her world thrown upside down. Reflect on the terrified disciples in the locked room suddenly seeing Jesus among them; or the two disciples on the road to Emmaus slowly coming to recognise Jesus; or the disciples fishing on the Sea of Galilee, realising that the shadowy figure on the lakeshore is the Lord.

These are the stories of Easter triumph. They are moments when someone deep in shock and grief finds their whole world turned upside down; when the biggest smile you can imagine comes across their face even as the tears are still flowing; moments when the biggest pain and the biggest joy you can imagine come together in a way that you might struggle to imagine. Jesus who died – who Mary Magdalene and the other women saw dead on the cross, whose side they saw pierced with the spear – is alive. Death, the disciples knew just as we know, is a definitive end. Jesus died ... but that same Jesus is now standing here alive in front of me ... This can surely mean only one thing – he must be...

So what kind of 'triumphant holy day' is Easter? Possibly not one where we parade shouting through the streets like Champions League winners (sorry Chelsea fans – not this year). But this is a day for celebration. Lent is over. Easter has come. Perhaps we might think of those famous photos of the crowds celebrating on VE Day. Those crowds knew the destruction is all around them; they knew the war in Japan continued; they knew that there were going to be hard years ahead. But they celebrated because the decisive victory had been won. In some ways, our Easter triumph is like those VE Day celebrations. And I hope our Easter Egg hunt will have some of the energy and exuberance of that great day.

But maybe too we might enjoy a quieter celebration. For our triumph is also too the triumph of those women and men at the empty tomb, only half able to believe the sight before their eyes for which there is no rational explanation. Our triumph is the disbelieving face of Sam Waley-Cohen on top of Noble Yeats, realising that his greatest dreams have come true.

The ugly face of death may still spread over the world, from the mourners gathering each day at our local crematoria to the disfigured bodies being discovered in mass graves in Bucha. But alongside our horror and pain at death we are called to be people of hope – people who hope that we will, in the new heaven and new earth, be reunited with those we have loved. This is the triumph of Easter Day.

Jesus lives! thy terrors now  
can, O Death, no more appal us;  
Jesus lives! by this we know  
thou, O grave, canst not enthrall us.  
*Alleluia!*