

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People
Easter Sunday – Year A

RCL Readings – Acts 10:34-43; Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24; Colossians 3:1-4; John 20:1-18.

ACNA Readings – Acts 10:34-43; Psalm 118:14-17, 22-24; Colossians 3:1-4; John 20:1-10.

Introduction. The Resurrection is the foundation of our faith and the truth of Christianity rests upon it. The call for all followers of Yeshua to witness and testify to this truth is an essential part of the ministry in which we all share.

Common Theme. The theme of the readings this week is about testifying to the truth of the resurrection. In our reading from Acts, we see how it leads Cornelius to Yeshua, in the Psalms how the risen Yeshua is the cornerstone of our faith, and in Colossians how Paul testified to the risen Christ to solve internal problems in the community there. Our Gospel reading recalls the event itself, and how Yeshua is found among the living, and not the dead.

Acts 10:34-43. Peter has been staying in Joppa, modern-day Jaffa, with Simon the Tanner. He has just received the series of visions of the blanket with all kinds of creatures upon it descending from heaven, and been commanded by the Father to ‘kill and eat’. Peter comes to a place of understanding that it is a metaphor that the gospel message is for all people and not just the Jewish people. Told by the Spirit to go with the men sent by Cornelius the God-Fearer,¹ he enters his house and testifies to the whole household.

Peter’s message begins in verses 34 and 35 with a clear statement that God shows no partiality or favour that restricts his love, and that anyone can enjoy living a vibrant and holy life in relationship with the Lord regardless of what nationality they are. The implication in the text is clear that this statement would extend to include ethnic and religious background, social status, the rich and the poor, and that these human distinctions are transcended if someone is earnestly seeking God turns to him, and desires with a full heart to live a righteous life. Judaism today – and of Peter’s time – does hold a similar understanding to this in that righteous gentiles can share in the ‘Olam HaBa’, the world to come, through living in the fear of the Lord and seeking holiness.² Peter makes clear in the following verses that there is a caveat to this however, and that this is only possible through faith in the risen Messiah, Yeshua.

Cornelius is well placed to receive Peter’s message, especially as he is someone who meets the description given in verse 35 of being in fear of the Lord; in other words, he is already earnestly seeking God. In our own context, just as Peter was told to go to Cornelius by the Spirit, there is a model here to follow and one that is repeated throughout the Book of Acts, especially in the life of Paul. The best fruit will be harvested for the Kingdom when we follow where the Lord leads us to

¹ God-fearers were gentiles who had come to believe in the one God of Israel but who had not, or would not, fully convert. In the Hellenistic world, the practice of circumcision was viewed with disdain and repulsion, and I believe this would account for one of the reasons many God-fearing males would not take the final step of conversion as it would require them to be circumcised. They would normally have adopted some Jewish practices and established a relationship with Jewish people in their community. Several examples of God-fearers can be found in scripture, including the God Fearing Greeks in Acts 17.

² Tosefta, Sanhedrin 13:2

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witness, as opposed to randomly testifying or following ideas or paths that we may think best in sharing the gospel, but that may well not be where the Lord wants us to concentrate our efforts. We may well be able to present the most eloquent testimony about Yeshua, but we need to give that testimony where the Spirit calls us to give it. God knows who will have *ears to hear* and a heart ready to listen, and it may well be that he leads us in directions and to people we did not expect to go to, who have open hearts and minds that are ready to receive the good news and turn back to God.

It could be argued here that at the most basic level, Peter's testimony is the catalyst for Cornelius to fully embrace the one God of Israel. He joins the dots and completes the puzzle in his mind about how to respond to his desire to be closer to God. Note how clear Peter's testimony is to follow; he identifies who Yeshua is, recounts his baptism by John the herald of the Messiah, and his ministry in spirit and power, before testifying as an eyewitness to his death and resurrection. He keeps his message simple and sticks to the facts.

The final two verses of this passage are particularly relevant to us today. Just as the prophets bore witness to the coming Messiah and how the world would be freed from sin through him, we share in their mandate to point people to Yeshua. Like Peter, we are commanded to proclaim and preach the resurrection of Yeshua, a fact on which our entire faith rests. Easter is a time when we rightly rejoice with joy and celebrate God raising Yeshua from death and the forgiveness of our sins, but it should also be a time when we should renew our commitment to testifying to the risen Lord as we, like Peter, have been commanded to do so. There are many people like Cornelius in the world who are searching, and at Easter, we have the opportunity to share with them that this celebration is more than just a time for family and Chocolate eggs. Pray then that we too are led by the Spirit to these modern-day God-fearers, and will have the opportunity to witness to them.

Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24. A beautiful Psalm, and one entirely appropriate for Easter Day, for as we read in verses 1 and 2 the Lord is indeed good, and his steadfast love endures forever! Verses 14 to 24 immediately resonate with the Easter resurrection accounts we reflect on today, with the Lord overcoming death and opening the gate to salvation.

Following the theme of testifying to the Lord, the cornerstone of verse 22 is particularly significant. Both Yeshua himself,³ Peter,⁴ and Paul⁵ use this verse to make clear that the Messiah of God will be the one on whom the salvation of God will rest and no other. In buildings in the Ancient Near East, the Cornerstone was not just one of the foundation stones but needed to be perfectly square as the alignment of the walls was set by it. Imperfection meant this stone would be rejected, as the alignment of the whole house would be off if it was not perfectly shaped. For us as believers in Yeshua, he is not just the foundation of our faith, but also the focal point to whom we look to straighten and align our lives as we live out our faith. Testifying how Yeshua has shaped and

³ Matthew 21:33-46.

⁴ Acts 4:11.

⁵ Ephesians 2:20.

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straightened our lives is an important part of our testimony to others about the transforming power of the risen Christ.

Colossians 3:1-4. Written in AD 62 in the same period Paul writes to Philemon and the Ephesians, the letter is in response to a dangerous teaching that has entered the church at Colossae. The proliferation of charms, amulets, and texts from elements of Jewish Mysticism and Pagan practices that have been found in the location suggests the fledgling church may well have started to include some of these practices in its spiritual life. Paul raises the issue of these practices in Chapter 2, and here at the beginning of Chapter 3 provides his response to these fallacies; that the believers should re-cast their focus solely on the person of Christ, in whom all has been accomplished. The opening verses immediately remind the Colossian believers of two key elements central to the Christian life. The first is that the resurrected Christ now sits at the right hand of the Father. This very visual image of Christ's position of ultimate authority over all is counter to those who may have infiltrated the church life in Colossae and attributed power and authority to other practices, rites, or beliefs. It is the risen Christ who is above all other things, including principalities and any other spiritual or temporal power, or any earthly teacher, and the believers must submit to His authority and no other.

The second element is that they are to focus on 'things above, and not things on earth'. The right focus concentrates on the Kingdom of Heaven, lived out here on earth. The King's priorities are above those of the world and it is these, and not worldly concerns or influences, that the believers should concentrate on.

The closing verses reiterate the promise and hope that the believers can have confidence that all who are *hidden* in Christ will stand with him in glory at his return in the second coming.

In the modern-day world, when one looks at the church in all its many different denominations and forms across the world it is sad to see that – like the church at Colossae – recent years in particular have seen a rise and return of non-Christian practices and teachings entering mainstream church life, theology, and practice.⁶ As we read these verses on Easter Day, let us take them as both a warning and reminder that the focus and practice of the Church on earth should at all times revolve around the truth of who Yeshua is, that He is risen and ascended to the right hand of the Father, and that His authority stands above any other. The Body of Christ on Earth does not need to introduce other practices into its life, and need only rely on the simple truth of the Gospel; that Yeshua suffered, died, and was resurrected, and that in Him and in Him alone do we have all that we need to fully participate in the Kingdom of God here and now.

John 20:1-18. Our gospel reading this week is one I suspect most of us – who have attended church for any length of time – are only too familiar with. The women, rushing to the tomb to anoint the

⁶ There are numerous examples of elements of New Age practice and worship entering mainstream denominations in recent years that echo the kind of problems the church at Colossae encountered. The increasing introduction of 'Gaia' or 'Mother Earth festivals' in churches over the last decade would be one example which has provoked significant debate and controversy among Christians of all denominations.

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body of their Lord as is their custom, arrive to find the huge stone, probably weighing at least a ton, rolled back and the tomb empty.

The women don't know where to look for Yeshua, so they rush to get the other disciples. They need to know where Yeshua's body is as it is not there. The grave clothes curiously folded is a mystery. Touching the flesh of a corpse made you ritually unclean so that confuses things even further; why would someone take off the wrappings Yeshua was wrapped in before taking the body? In their minds, the thought rings loudly and clearly – Where is Yeshua!⁷

For me, the key verse for us this Easter Day is verse 15. Yeshua says to Mary:

“Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?”

Who is she seeking? A dead Rabbi? A person she thought she could put her trust in? The man she believed with all her heart was God's anointed Messiah? She is seeking Yeshua and, in a moment that recalls John chapter 10.3-4,⁸ as soon as she hears Yeshua say her name, she suddenly recognises this is not a gardener but her Lord. Just as Yeshua had said in John 10, Mary recognises his voice and she has found who she is looking for. Yeshua is not as she first thought and among the dead, rather he is living. Mary – despite her best intentions – had been looking in the wrong place.

Grab hold of that for a moment. Mary made an assumption, she looked for Yeshua among the dead. Her thinking, although in her mind logical, was misguided. Yeshua was not among the dead, he was, and is, among the living. Death – as the word of God prophesied so many centuries before – could not contain him. If Mary had reflected on these prophecies – and we need to cut her some slack from what she had seen over those last few days – she would have remembered that Yeshua was not to be found among the dead, rather amongst the living, resurrected and in glory.

“Why are you looking for living among the dead?” How many people today are looking for Yeshua among the dead? Perhaps we don't help ourselves there. How many churches have images of the cross, the means of Yeshua's death, or crucifixes with Yeshua's body shown dying on the cross? How often do Christians focus mainly on, and speak to others about, Christ on the cross enduring and suffering for us that he might offer himself as an atoning sacrifice for the people of the world? How does that balance with how frequently we preach about the empty tomb and the risen Messiah? I want to be clear that I am not knocking crucifixes or crosses, both of which are important symbols of our faith. Can you see though how people walking into a church, without any real knowledge of the faith AND the resurrection, would *look for Yeshua amongst the dead* and focus solely on the cross,

⁷ As a new tomb, the body would have been clearly visible from the entrance. New and previously unused tombs had two shelves, one for the body and an 'ossuary shelf', a place where the bones of the deceased would be placed after one year, once the flesh had decayed leaving only the remaining bones. Later, when the tomb was occupied by other family members, additional shelves would be cut in the rock, though somewhat back from the entrance and harder to see. For the disciples, with the stone of this new tomb rolled away, it would be clear that there was no body on the shelf inside.

⁸ John 10.3-4: To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice.

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especially when we often preach and speak so passionately about his sacrificial offering for our sins? Do we need then to be more an Easter Sunday people who testify more to the Risen Lord and the empty tomb, as opposed to Good Friday people speaking more about the cross? I suspect that a balance of both is required.

The theme of the readings this week is about testifying to the truth of the resurrection. John, although carefully recording the crucifixion as an eyewitness, is just as careful in recording the truth he came to realise as the beloved disciple who stood in the tomb that Easter morning. Yeshua was not there, Yeshua had risen. Of all the times in the year, at Easter we have a wonderful opportunity to point people in the right direction, in other words, to remind them that we worship a Yeshua who is not only among the living but victorious over death, glorified and that for all who will accept him, they can enjoy a living relationship with him. The gospel reading this week ends with Mary witnessing to the other disciples that “I have seen the Lord”; although we may not have physically seen the risen Yeshua, we can testify that we know his voice in our hearts and that he knows ours. Our faith is founded on the truth of the resurrection, the truth of the testimonies of those who witnessed the risen Lord, and the truth that Yeshua now sits at the right hand of the Father and has the victory over sin and death. A Risen Lord who, like Mary, calls each of us by our own name.

Alleluia, Christ is risen! He is risen indeed, Alleluia!

About the author. Fr Kevin Cable is the priest of St Peter's Anglican Church in Jaffa, Israel. A Messianic Jew, he was a long-serving police officer in the United Kingdom before training for ordained ministry at Ripon College Cuddesdon, Oxford in 2006. After many years as a parish priest in the United Kingdom, since 2020 he has worked with the Church Mission Society to strengthen the Christian presence in Jaffa, and to rebuild the Anglican Community, most of whom left in 1948. He is married to Jen, a lifelong nurse, and together they share the ministry to people of all faiths and none in Israel.