

Sermon for Easter Eve and Easter Day 2021

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Easter Eve: Christ Church Cathedral, Grafton

Easter Day, St Mark's, Casino

A Strange Surprise?



*Workers disinfect a staircase at Christ the Redeemer Monument, Rio de Janeiro, August 2020.
telesureenglish.net.*

Compassion is the new normal. Compassion is the new normal.

2020 began with drought and bushfire, rapidly segueing into a global pandemic. In such conditions the need for compassion has been realised: for ways to rethink how we live and reimagine the structures by which we share the planet.

The search engine Google tells me that the word compassion was one of the most searched terms in 2020; it was searched more times than at ever before in internet history.

While it's a bit sad to think people didn't know what it actually was and therefore had to search it, let's focus on the positives: evidence hopefully of a change of heart, a re-thinking of priorities, possibly even a preparedness to think about the "other" first, ahead of my own needs.

Also amongst the most popular search terms were questions like:

How to thank: a nurse/doctor/ bus driver/ teacher

How to help: during COVID-19 / during bushfires

Maybe a sad indictment on a not very thankful or helpful culture beforehand otherwise people would have had to search up how to thank or help, but again, let's focus on the positives. Each in their own way these are small pieces of evidence that perhaps the 'me' culture is being eroded.

Meanwhile, movements such as #MeToo, Black Lives Matter and Extinction Rebellion highlighted the most basic flaws in our sociopolitical systems, where a tiny minority rich elite extract more and more wealth to themselves forcing the majority into precarity and poverty. COVID-19 has highlighted and drawn everyone's attention to the deep divisions and inequalities in human society.

Who would have thought? Who would have thought that a global event like this would reveal these deep divisions and prompt a questioning of the "Me First" culture? A strange surprise!

Some experts warned of our vulnerability to a pandemic like this, but most didn't. In a survey about three years ago, Nobel Prize winners, a learned group, were asked what were their top fears for the world. They mentioned many things such as terrorism, nuclear war and climate change, but very few thought that a global pandemic was very likely.

COVID-19 has proven to be a disruption, a crisis, that in many ways was unexpected. A strange surprise.

At Easter we celebrate and remember another kind of unexpected disruption or strange surprise that upset the status quo: a *divine* interruption – the Resurrection.

The Resurrection was a traumatic disturbance,¹ an event of rupture, that challenged existing systems of meaning and ways of knowing. It

shatters our way of making sense of the world. People don't die and come back to life three days later! This shattering is reflected in the Biblical account, such as the earthquake referred to in Matthew 28:2:

Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it.

And in the terror and amazement referred to in Mark 16:8:

So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

We are shattered and reformed as we try to make sense of the world into which Christ has risen.

We can't integrate this information into our everyday experience and write it off – only God can be at work here. In John's account Mary Magdalene saw the Risen Christ but supposed he was the gardener (20:15). It was unexpected and outside her experience. When the penny drops, she recognises him, and calls him ('Rabouni' v.16). She now realises that only God could be at work here.

The light of this resurrection disturbs us. In Matthew's account, this pure light, reflected by the Angel, traumatises the tomb guards and the women 28:3:

His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men.

We are traumatised when the true light penetrates our protective shield; it interrupts our blindness and complacency

We live in a 'me' culture where the individual, with all their rights and opinions, is the most important. You deserve to have this, I deserve to have that. I have the right to choose. My rights, opinions and prejudices are all-important. I have a right to an opinion and to voice it all over social media and elsewhere, even if it's not a very well informed opinion. Even if it's bigoted; after all, it's free speech isn't it?

Bishop Rowan Williams says that we make for ourselves a house of mirrors so that the whole world is a reflection of our own desires.ⁱⁱ

Yet with the resurrection of Jesus, our identity, formerly focused on ourselves, has come undone. I'm not at the centre and neither are you. We are exposed for what we are, and our need for new life in God is revealed. Jesus has died for me and for others, and God has acted for new life.

In the light of what God has done in the Resurrection, his intervention in our human world, our understanding of what is possible is overturned.

In a strange way, our current crisis or rupture, the COVID-19 Pandemic, has pointed out to the world something that the Christian faith community has known since the resurrection. 'Me first' must become 'other first'. We are all interconnected as children of the creator. If one suffers, we all suffer and it's everyone's problem, not just the sufferer's problem.

Christian writer Henri Nouwen tells of a meeting with a US Vice-President. Nouwen asked what place compassion had in the affairs of government, and was told that compassion was like an eraser at the top of a pencil – it was only ever used to rub out a mistake in the usual operations of the pencil.ⁱⁱⁱ

Into the midst of this deeply ingrained culture comes the divine interruption that is the resurrection. Our world is strangely surprised by it, as Malcolm Guite's poem *Strange Surprise* proclaims:

*The here-and-now in all its strange surprise;
A space to be ourselves in, and a grace
That spins us round and turns us to the source
Whence all these gifts and graces still arise.
And now the one through whom all this was made,
Whom we ignore, on whom we turn our back,
Whom we denied, insulted and betrayed,
Gathers and offers for us all we lack,
Voices on our behalf creation's praise,*

And calls us to become the song he plays.^{iv}

The church, the Christian community and faith, has emerged out of this divine interruption that we celebrate as the resurrection. Christ's resurrection is the root of Christian identity. Jesus' self-offering, the triumph of good over evil, God acting for good, God offering new life, new identity in him, a life lived for others, not for ourselves.

When I was in Primary School we were given little punnets of potting mix into which we were to plant a tiny seed that we had been given. We had to take it home and water it and write notes about the growth of the small plant (I think it was watercress). I duly planted and watered mine and it grew. After a while mum caught me dismantling the soil and root system in search of the seed. This seed that had made the whole thing possible was nowhere to be found. Another strange surprise. Mum said "of course, don't be silly, the seed has given itself up so the new plant can come to life and grow".

This is the simple yet profound lesson of the life of Jesus that we celebrate today. Those who love their life will lose it. Clinging to oneself is a negative, defeating process. It's by letting go and living our lives for others that we find life. This is the strange surprise of the resurrection for you and for me. What we are comes to an end, so that what we shall be may come into being.

ⁱ Rowan Williams, See *Christ the Stranger*, p.31.

ⁱⁱ Rowan William, Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge*, Chapter 4.

ⁱⁱⁱ Henri Nouwen quoted in *Who Cares?* National Anglican Caring Organisations Network, p.48.

^{iv} Malcolm Guite, *Strange Surprise*. <https://malcolmguite.wordpress.com>