

From this week's Old Testament Lesson, from the Book of Exodus:

And when your children say to you, 'What do you mean by this service?' you shall say, 'It is the sacrifice of the LORD's Passover...' Exodus 12:26

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He was a lovely older man with a really dry sense of humour.

And, ever dear to my heart, he loved a good pun.

So, when he and his wife arrived for Easter dinner many years ago, after the usual greetings, and the sharing of the small gifts that they had brought for Janice and the girls, he proudly handed me a small chocolate Easter bunny, with a smile.

A completely disarming smile, as he delivered the punchline: "I thought you could use a little 'hare'."

If we are to believe all of the evidence of chocolate bunnies and eggs in the flyers and in the stores, Easter is here.

But if we are to even begin to understand what it is that we are about in this our celebration of the Resurrection, we need to do far more than grab another bit of candy.

As tempting as that may be.

To really understand what we are about this day we need to take an immense journey. Of the imagination. To go back thousands of years; not, as you might be assuming, to a garden tomb just beyond the walls of the City of Jerusalem, but more than a millennium before that: to the dry rocky hills and valleys of the Judean desert.

We need to imagine what those dry rocky hillsides looked like to a band of weary travellers who were the descendants of a fearful, rebellious, cantankerous rabble who, just forty years before, had been rescued from slavery and death in Egypt; rescued not from some minor third-rate power but from the hand of the great Pharaoh himself.

We need to try to understand what it meant to those who had spent their entire lives in the desert; 40 years in the harsh, unforgiving, sands of the Sinai Peninsula, as they took that first step from one side of the Jordan River to the other; that first step into the Promised Land. Forty years walking and waiting. Forty years dreaming and praying. Hoping that they might live long enough to see that day.

For all time, that one moment has been understood as the defining event in their history: 'when Israel came out of Egypt' as the psalm says. For them, Exodus meant liberation. Exodus was for them the end of oppression. The beginning of a whole new life in a whole new world.

So down through the generations, at this Passover time of the year, our Jewish sisters and brothers have told that story; as they are telling it again this week. Over and over again they've told the story of how God heard the cry of his people; of how he brought them out of Egypt and across the sea; of how he utterly destroyed the enemy; and went before them and behind them in the desert as a pillar of cloud and fire. It was their salvation story, their Easter story. By that one great act they knew that God could reverse the fortunes of those who were destined to die. They knew that life could begin again.

And throughout the Scriptures, the message is the same: that God is able to deliver those who trust in him from the worst assaults of princes and potentates.

That's why Scripture, and why this morning's liturgy, speak of the resurrection of Jesus as a kind of exodus story. The story of Israel's deliverance from Pharaoh, and all that Pharaoh represented: slavery, powerlessness and despair, [the story of Israel's deliverance from Pharaoh] gives us a language in which to speak about life rising from the dead.

In Jesus, the last enemy, the greatest enemy of all, death itself, has been defeated. The wreckage of its kingdom lies strewn around the open tomb from which He is risen. The tyrant of all tyrants is defeated for all time. In the Resurrection of Christ, the old-world empires and their grip on human life have been swept away. A new kingdom has come. In the empty tomb, nothing less than a new heaven and a new earth are promised.

And the Resurrection of our Saviour Christ invites us to believe that our destiny lies not with Pharaoh or any other world ruler but with the one who is risen from the dead, whose kingdom is righteousness and peace, whose power is love.

But it takes an immense leap of the imagination to think that this could be true. Everything around us seems to speak against it: the pain and suffering of all humanity, the abuses of power and the threat of terror that are the staple of each day's news, the economic challenges; the climate crisis; mass graves; and a human river of refugees and exiles.

So, perhaps we can understand why they doubted the first reports from Mary Magdalene that she had seen Jesus risen from the dead. That he was alive. That she had spoken to him. They had no expectations at all about Resurrection. They knew that dead meant dead. That people didn't come back from the dead, especially after such a painful and bitter death.

Which is why the Resurrection became such a life-changing thing for them. Completely; utterly, absolutely life-changing. And that's why they spent the rest of their lives proclaiming it; even when proclaiming Jesus risen from the dead meant violence and death for them.

Because they'd already seen the darkness. They'd already felt the reality of hopelessness and despair. They'd known the full weight of failure. And if Jesus was no longer dead; if, somehow, someday, Jesus was risen from the dead, then he must have been right all along. That he was no pretender or fool or mad man. The fact that he was standing before them alive could mean only one thing: that he was the Christ; and that life had changed for ever. His life and their lives.

And that's why for us Resurrection is not just a future hope. It's not just the life that we are promised after death. It's also the kind of life that we are promised right now. Life changed, given new meaning, new purpose. Filled with hope.

And in a world filled with darkness, a world groaning in pain, where expectations can so often be shattered in the blink of an eye, because of the Resurrection and only because of the Resurrection, we, like Mary Magdalene and the disciples, [we] can live in hope; without panic; without fear. And we, like them, on this Easter morning, can echo that ancient cry:

*Alleluia! Christ is Risen!
The Lord is Risen indeed! Alleluia!*