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**The Bishop of Lincoln’s Easter Day Sermon 2024**

**Lincoln Cathedral**

As you can tell, I have lived down to my reputation for not being an athlete. Nonetheless, even I can manage a wobbly run or a hop and a skip. Two now adult goddaughters often recall that one of our shared treats when they were small was for us to skip down the street together. I have done this with all my godchildren bar one who said ‘Let’s stay in. You’re just too embarrassing.’

Well, I am really glad that you and I did not stay at home today. I am so beyond embarrassment that you might just catch a glimpse of me skipping later through the streets of Lincoln. Today is the Day of Resurrection. Jesus Christ has risen from the dead. The tomb is empty. We have come to rejoice together that what defines us in Christ is not death, but life; not darkness, but light; not hatred, but love. In the 1460’s, Piero della Francesca painted his famous resurrection fresco, the figure of Jesus appearing to the twentieth century author, Aldous Huxley, as being very athletic. If you like, we have come to church to take our Easter spiritual exercise, which is taken up in churches the length and breadth of Greater Lincolnshire. Denominational and other differences fade before the shared reality of the risen Christ.

I have belonged to a gym more than once where my most strenuous act was to write the cheque for the membership fee. Today, however, we are not doing something vicarious. We are like the Beloved Disciple and Peter running to the tomb having heard the news from Mary Magdalene that the body of Jesus has gone. In the gospels we very rarely read about people running. Mary of Bethany runs to Jesus as he comes to raise Lazarus from the dead. Here is an event immeasurably more important than the raising of Lazarus. So, the disciples’ pace quickens as they race to the tomb. The Beloved Disciple gets there first not because he is necessarily physically younger and fitter. Remember that Peter denied Jesus and it was the Beloved Disciple who stands at the foot of the Cross and witnessed the death of Jesus. He gets there first because he is better prepared spiritually to be a witness to the empty tomb. The whole of Lent and Holy Week has been the Church’s training régime to be ready for the action today. I hesitate to say that I am any leaner; but I hope that many of us today feel that we want to be more mobile and agile in our prayer and service to God.

The Resurrection is not just a one-off event. John Stott wrote that “Christianity in its essence a resurrection religion. If you remove it, Christianity is destroyed.” To put it another way, the resurrection is the first article of faith for Christians and encompasses and illuminates everything else in the Bible. With all the apostles and saints, we are being drawn by the Spirit into the New Creation inaugurated by the Risen Christ. That movement appeared to falter through the failure of Peter and others to understand; but Jesus is Lord of the Dance. The forces of evil cut him down, but he leapt up high. He is the life that can never, never die. He is dancingly alive forever. He invites all of us to join in his dance, two left feet for God and with clodhopping enthusiasm, just as the apostles carried this good news to the whole known world.

The whole of our life is being threaded through with hope and with thanksgiving because of what Christ has accomplished by bursting forth from the grave. Geoffrey Studdert-Kennedy, known as ‘Woodbine Willy’ by the soldiers he ministered to on the front line in the First World War, said that if Christ be not risen the most dreadful consequence would be that we would have no remedy for our sins. Everything wrought on Calvary is applied to every penitent heart. The consequence is that we have hope and a deep defiance in the face of any deficit of mercy among us. Mary Magdalene did not recognise Jesus at first because of her grief and loss. Today there are many grieving and hurting people - in Ukraine Gaza, Israeli hostages of Hamas and their families. Our hope in the Resurrection puts us in solidarity with them. Our hope makes us strong enough to stand by the afflicted and not run away from raw sadness and hopelessness.

Mary was preoccupied with the dead body of her friend. She was trapped by the call of the tomb and did not see New Creation in the garden. At this time of year many of us are missing loved ones who have gone to their rest. Because Mary actually met her friend fully alive in his Resurrection body, we have confidence that we shall be re-united with them in heaven. Archbishop Michael Ramsey wrote that at the time of Christ’s rising from the dead there were many people who believed in a life to come, but none believed hitherto in a future life which was so vivid, immediate, central and triumphant. “Nowhere did the belief combine a conscious nearness of the world to come with a moral exalting of life in this present world. This was what Christianity brought. Its doctrine was not a light to another world that left this world behind, nor was it a longing for another world that would come when this world was ended. It was the very close certainty of another world, with which the Christians were already linked and into which the life of the world would be raised up.” As one Early Church Father put it, “Christ has turned all our sunsets into dawns”. Joy is the greatest dimension of our celebration.

Therefore, right now we are being invited to embrace life in all its fullness, the gift which Jesus promises us. Our joy is not about having a fixed grin on our faces or pretending that we are never hurting or afraid. It is having a profound confidence that God loves us so much that He would send his Son to die on a cross and break asunder the power of death. When the Allies were forcing the German army to retreat through Tuscany there was hard fighting. Heavy Allied shelling had been deployed. However, the artillery officer responsible for the bombing campaign prevented the shelling of Sansepulcro, the town which housed della Francesca’s resurrection, because he had read Huxley’s opinion that it was the best painting in the world, and Huxley wasn’t even a Christian. The light of the resurrection of Jesus cannot be extinguished. Pope Benedict XVI wrote that “the paschal revelation gives us the right to sing ‘alleluia’ in a world overcast with the cloud of death.” Let us rejoice to be members of the Body of Christ, living his joy and peace, defiant in the face of every evil and ready to smile even through our tears because we are in step with the Lord of the Dance.

Alleluia. Christ is risen! He is risen indeed. Alleluia! Amen.