

Easter Day - Christ is Risen ...

... the boundaries crumble

A sermon given on the Easter Day, 31st March 2024, by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster

John 20:1-18

Now, I have here a very solid-looking box. My first task for you this morning is to get you to guess what might be inside it. Of all the infinite number of things in the world that might be in this box, what do you think it might contain?

[Jonathan moves to the choir to engage with the choristers; the congregation is large and mixed]

Any chorister has got any ideas? Come on then. What do you think? 'Might be an Easter egg.' Hopeful one. Good guess. Sadly, no. Any other thoughts? What do you think? 'A chocolate bunny.' There are no air holes in it. I'm not sure the bunny would survive. No. Good try. Any other guesses? What's inside my box? Other one? Yeah. 'A wooden cross.' Good try. Yeah. No, there's no cross in there. There's somebody here. Yeah. 'Nothing.' Oh, very good. Yes, my box has nothing in it. Well done. Okay. The reason it has nothing in it is because it contains the hour - you know, early this morning, we lost an hour: the clocks went forward from 12:59, they jumped to 2:00, and we lost a whole hour. Where did it go? What things might have happened during that hour that can now no longer happen? It's a great mystery as to how you can lose a whole hour - I thought I was keeping it safely here, but it's escaped, and now all the clocks have gone forward. It's as if there is a hole in time. We thought time was fixed; that it was unchanging; that it could never vary. But actually, the hour going forward, us losing the hour, finding a hole in time, it makes me question, "What's going on here?" When you think about it, there are other things that make us wonder about time. If you go to Christ Church, Oxford, they have a bell there, a bit like 'Great John', only theirs is called 'Great Tom.' Every evening at five past nine, Great Tom strikes nine o'clock. Because in Oxford, the time is five minutes slower than everywhere else. What's going on there? Einstein has his Theory of Relativity, saying that time isn't constant, that depending on where you are or how fast you're travelling, time either speeds up or slows down. It's not as fixed as we thought. We're all looking at our watches thinking, 'I've only got five minutes to spare.' - but actually, it's more flexible than that; it's more mysterious; it's brilliant; people who are getting older say that time passes more quickly; time is relative; it's not fixed.

On Easter morning, Mary finds the tomb is empty and the body is missing. It's like there's a hole in death. Something that should have been there turns out to be missing. There's a gap.

The message of Easter is that there is a hole in death where eternity can get in. Death is not the fixed boundary that we thought it was. It's not the constant, unchanging reality that we imagine it must be. We do love our boundaries, don't we? We like to think that time is fixed and I've only got so much time. But we love our borders; our frontiers; our checkpoints; our lines in the sand; all these things that try to separate one thing from another and keep the world regulated and in good order. These boundaries often seem fixed and real, but they're only there because we have decided they should be.

There's a lovely story from the 19th century about how surveyors were marking out the boundary between the United States and Canada. They were measuring out the boundary and they were making little cairns of stones to mark where the boundary was. The Native Americans wondered what was going on and they went up to the surveyors and asked. The surveyors said, rather patronisingly, 'Oh, this is on the command of the Great White Mother, Queen Victoria, over the ocean. We're making medicine. We're making a special magic line, a boundary, a frontier.' The Native Americans weren't very impressed until they went cattle raiding into the United States. When they were coming back north, herding the cattle they had stolen and being chased by the sheriff and his posse, they were amazed to discover that when they crossed the medicine line, the sheriff and his posse stopped. They couldn't understand why, but they realised that the Great White Mother must have powerful medicine to be able to stop them being chased by their enemy. Many of us have a medicine line in our heads that tells us there are fixed boundaries - there are limits we cannot possibly cross and they narrow down and they limit what we can do.

When we believe that death is fixed, our lives become narrower and more limited: we want to keep within that boundary; we're afraid of the future; we want to put off that boundary as long as possible; we want to avoid any risks that might take us closer to death.

But actually, if there is a hole in death, as we say on Easter morning, then God might get through and open up a new future. If there is a hole in death, there might be a way through from despair to hope. If there is a hole in death, there might be a way through from fear to freedom, freedom to take risks: the risk of treating one another fairly; the risk of trusting each other; the risk of loving each other; the risk of forgiving each other.

At Easter, we celebrate how God has punched a hole through the boundary of death - Jesus is risen; the final frontier has been penetrated; the hour has gone forward not just an hour, but into eternity.

And as we believe in the risen Lord Jesus Christ, so all the boundaries crumble away.

Reading Text

John 20:1-18

¹ Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. ² So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.' ³ Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went towards the tomb. ⁴ The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵ He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶ Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷ and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. ⁸ Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; ⁹ for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ¹⁰ Then the disciples returned to their homes. ¹¹ But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; ¹² and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. ¹³ They said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' She said to them, 'They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.' ¹⁴ When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵ Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?' Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.' ¹⁶ Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabbouni!' (which means Teacher). ¹⁷ Jesus said to her, 'Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." ' ¹⁸ Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her.