

How does the story end?

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 24 April 2022

A reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Easter 2C

Contemporary Reading: Healing Words from the remembering of the Frontier Warsⁱ; John 20.19-31

The video of this worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/> The version below is not a transcript, but the script from which the reflector spoke, so there may be some changes of wording.

How do we want our stories to end? Whether it is our own story, or that of our community, our nation, our world, much is up to us. Now, we may not have much room for manoeuvre. All kinds of forces help shape our lives, internal and unconscious, as well as external and recognised. Yet we still have power to shape our stories, even if only by our attitudes, and by how we receive and respond to what happens to us.

This truth is at the very heart of the Gospel and the power of love, forgiveness, and justice seeking. For, however you view the Resurrection stories, a common feature is their open, unfinished nature. The tomb is not sealed. The body is not there or is transformed. The end is a new beginning. So how do we want the story to continue?

The openness of the Resurrection is not only expressed in the different, striking Gospel stories and symbols, but in their very shape and variety. For, significantly, the Resurrection narratives simply cannot be smoothed out. This, in my view, should give us confidence in Christ's Resurrection. For if they were easily reconcilable, we might have reasonable suspicion of ideological interests at play – much as we see in some interpretations of the Resurrection, and Christian Faith more widely, among some today.

Instead, we have a cluster of stories which collectively speak of a mystery and a power of transformation which just cannot be reduced. For the Resurrection busts our attempts at straightforward understanding and, at every turn of the Gospel endings, breaks open fresh possibilities of seeing, experiencing, relating, and, crucially, living into the future.

The ending of Mark's Gospel is particularly striking in illustrating the open character of the Resurrection. No wonder much scholarly attention has been given to the differing length and content of its endings in its original Greek texts. Yet consider also the ending of John's Gospel, or more accurately the endings of John's Gospel, part of which we hear today, and more of which we will hear next week.

These also reflect a wrestling with the mystery of the Resurrection which is clearly not limited to any straightforward set of stories and symbols, and which remains continually open to the future and development. For, as John's Gospel puts it, in its final verse today, its narratives are written so that others '*may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Beloved One of God, and that through believing you (they) may have life in their name.*' Note well, this is not closure, nor even certainty, but life through Jesus.

This is probably part of the original version of John's Gospel, although today we have a further chapter, adding fresh resurrection stories. There however, the same openness and emphasis on new beginnings and not endings is displayed. As the next chapter puts it, in its last verse: '*But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.*' For all those who come afterwards, like you and I, are to be new stories of resurrection, living our lives as living witnesses to the power of God's Love.

Even then we may wonder theologically. As one of my old Oxford lecturers, Professor John Macquarie, used to say, John's Gospel can also be read as a theological tragedy, in the deepest, dramatic, classical sense. It is thus possible to see its real ending as the death of Jesus itself, without the resurrection stories. For John places great emphasis on the cross, the lifting of Jesus, as the moment of greatest revelation of divine love. It is here that John says that divine victory is won, the time is fulfilled, and, in Jesus' words from the cross, '*it is finished*'. All else is mopping up.

Love has been fully displayed in human form, not only in living – in healing, serving and teaching – but, crucially, in suffering, and in dying. Right to the end, and to whatever lies beyond, Love has been revealed, and has won through. In the power of that Love, living and dying, in all things, even suffering and death, we can trust and be transformed.

So why did John, or the wider early Christian community, add (next week's) chapter 21? It is a little odd, if you want clear, dramatic, endings. For, in today's story, Thomas proclaims '*My Lord and my God*'. What a powerful way to conclude the revelation of Christ.

But no, there is more to be known about the Resurrection. John's Jesus makes this point. "*Have you believed because you have seen me?*" he says to Thomas. Resurrection is so much more. For as Jesus tellingly adds, "*Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.*" Later stories of faith, including our own, are also key to what faith, the Gospel, and Resurrection itself, are all about.

Do we see what is happening here in the scriptures themselves? The writers and their communities are de-centring the events of Jerusalem and Galilee long ago, and the experiences of the first disciples. They are not to be over-privileged, as Christians have often done. Yes, extraordinary things happened back then. Spiritually speaking, we can draw wonderfully on these stories and find renewing life in reflecting on them. Yet, as John's Gospel especially affirms, eternal life is always 'everywhen' – then, now, and to come. Resurrection is a story to be lived, now and into the future. It is not just an old story, still less one to cling to.

Just as Jesus relativises Thomas' experience and that profound Christological declaration, so too, in the Gospel's second ending, in chapter 21, John's Jesus relativises Peter's importance, when he upbraids him about his betrayal, commanding him to love and feed God's people. As in Mark's Gospel, this expresses deep early Christian struggles over power and truth and how Jesus' mission is to be carried forward. Peter and the Twelve, including Thomas in today's today, do not therefore emerge as glowing examples of Resurrection in its fullness.

Rather their claims to privileged places in the Christian story are corrected at the very outset by the Gospels' insistence on needing to include, and keep on adding, other stories, not least of those on the margins. This is one reason, surely, why Mary Magdalene and other women appear so centrally in the Resurrection narratives.

They too are not to be over-privileged as ways into Resurrection. Instead, they call us to our own recognition of the living Christ among us. For the key truth of Resurrection is that God in Christ is still alive. The real challenge is not, as in Thomas' story, to reconcile spirit and materiality, but to live in Christ, as Christ, with Christ, today.

The openness of the Resurrection is so vitally important, not just to help us understand faith, but also to help us live in the world, and make history. For there are always those who will tell us that history, and politics, are closed. Back in 1992, for example, shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall and old-style Soviet Communism, the American political scientist Francis Fukuyama wrote a famous book entitled *The End of History and the Last Man*. He argued that humanity had:

"not just ... the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: That is, the end-point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government."

Well, that worked out well, didn't it?!

At the time, Fukuyama's thesis embodied the striking arrogance among Western liberal elites that their form of life is the only real and universal truth and will conquer everywhere. In some ways, that repeats the mistakes of imperialist forms of Christianity. Aside from the sexist use of 'man' and mankind', which immediately symbolises the relegation of other gendered experience – the majority of humankind – actual history has also not been very kind to this ideology.

Firstly, various forms of Islam have proved remarkably resistant, steering their own paths through postmodernity in different ways. Secondly, China, and to some extent India, also follow their own distinct pathways. Meanwhile, thirdly, and currently most disturbingly, Russia has simply refused to fall in line with Western assumptions. In doing so, it has indeed helped inspire the rise of autocratic politics in Western countries – not least, most troubling of all, in the USA itself.

The reality is, that like faith, history can never be simplified, nor closed – whether it be the history of a nation, or of the planet as a whole, or our own personal lives. Certainly the continuing power of Christ's Resurrection does not allow it. For we can try to shape faith and politics, and our own lives, by nurturing chosen symbols and narratives. That is how humans forge necessary life-giving meaning and purpose, as well as seek power and privilege for ourselves. We will also often find that unwelcome symbols and narratives will circumscribe our hopes and lives, perhaps at every turn.

However we, as human beings, can never control faith or history. If we try, we will be frustrated and kill the goodness in our own symbols and stories. For Resurrection Love is always changing life, changing faith, changing history, with new stories and new possibilities. To live as Resurrection people is to share in this.

To summarise, the Resurrection proclaims that there are always new possibilities in both faith and history, life and politics. So much depends upon what we see, what we privilege, and where, and with whom, we want to walk onwards. At present in Australia, we are very much at a crossroads in this, and not just because we have a federal election. For we have many narratives thrust urgently upon us, some quite disturbing in origin, character and purpose - and, I have to say, so less nuanced, elegant, and intelligent than Fukuyama's '*end of history*' thesis.

Meanwhile other vital narratives are hard to hear at all, or have yet to be given birth or voice. So which stories will we see and hear? Which new stories will we help birth and voice? Which resurrection stories will we live into?

I hope that many of us will stay for the short film being presented by our Earthweb group today. For *'Regenerating Australia'* is part of what I have described: a re-imagining, a pathway to new ways of seeing and being – a fresh and open invitation into how we may live into God's Resurrection, and be resurrection stories ourselves today.

Similarly, I hope we may reflect upon the new stories being lived, and, literally, danced, on this ANZAC Day Eve, as represented by the photo on the front of our liturgy sheet, from the Frontier Wars Ceremony in Gimuy, Cairns. Like the Gospel, this resurrection story emerges from suffering, yet embodies hope and new life, encouraging us to find resurrection in our own journeys. Our first reading today indicated how First Nations people understand such ceremony, but let me also conclude with words of a later-comer, Margaret Pestorius:ⁱⁱ

"We start with the story telling of the Frontier. And we perform a lament in response... (with) no words. It is a cry from our hearts and our bodies as we dance and play music. We then are led in song by First Nations performers from neighbouring tribes or from across the seas. And we process to the great shields of renewal created by the artist Paul Bong, a Yidindji man."

"Why can't Australians think about resisting war and Australia's increasing militarism? Is it related to the silence and denial we have wrapped around the wars of invasion on this continent?... We must tell the stories of the Land. And we must tell the stories of the many families and tribes and nations that suffered the atrocities of colonising warfare. We need to build these real events in our minds..."

"We have noticed that when we tell frontier war stories in partnership with Aboriginal people around the time of 'ANZAC Day', we also jam a spoke into the pervasive militarism that continues here. We disturb the manufactured 'national narrative' that overseas wars created this nation."

Like John, like Mark, like so many of the early Christians, and many since, how will we also disturb manufactured narratives, jam a spoke into them, and tell our own life-giving stories of transformed suffering and hope? How will we sing and dance, and live, the Resurrection?

In Christ's Name, Amen.

ⁱ from wagepeace.com.au

ⁱⁱ <https://www.wagepeaceau.org/frontierwarsoverview/0/>