



**THE ANGLICAN ARCHBISHOP OF ADELAIDE
EASTER SERMON 2011**

He is not here – he is Risen

The digital age has produced a world of 20 second grabs and arresting one-liners, none more arresting, though, than the angelic one-liner in our Gospel reading today:
“He is not here. He is risen”.

It is the affirmation of the once for all resurrection of Christ. It is the great Easter word of hope.

But it is also a word of caution for the church, and in particular it is a word of caution to address the trend to fundamentalism today, in parts of Christianity and beyond.

At the heart of fundamentalism is a different assertion to that made by the Angel. In fact it is almost the opposite, for the fundamentalist asserts,

whether in Christianity or any number of other religions,

“He *is* here

We have it.

We possess it.

And we have the right to impose it.

The fundamentalist has it packed and possessed, and such certainty leads to arrogance and sadly beyond that, can be used to justify the worst sort of inhumanities.

I was in Egypt in January only days after the fundamentalist bombing of a Coptic Church in Alexandria, and able to see just a little of the grief of the Christian community and among Egyptians more widely.

Our world needs a vastly different discourse about religious difference than that provided by fundamentalism

“He is not here. He is risen”, the Angel said to the women.

Indeed, as Christians we must proclaim our distinctive: “He is risen!”

True and deep dialogue between faiths does not require the abandonment of distinctive claims. That’s politically correct nonsense that gets in the way of true and respectful dialogue.

So as Christians we make our claims about the uniqueness of Christ, and join with the writer of the letter to the Colossians in saying that the fulness of life is found in Christ.

He is risen indeed!

But alongside that Easter proclamation, we must add the other words from the Angel: “He is not here!”

Rowan Williams once wrote:

There is a clinging to Jesus that shows itself in the longing to be utterly sure of our rightness; we want him there, we want him where we can see him and manage him, so that we know exactly where to turn to be told that everything is all right and that he is on our side. We do it in religious conflicts, we do it in moral debates, we do it in politics. We want to stand still and be reassured, rather than moving faithfully with Jesus along a path into new life whose turnings we don't know in advance.^[i]

“He is not here”, the Angel said to the women.

We proclaim him.

We experience his life.

But we do not possess him; we cannot contain him.

He is not ours to bargain with.

“He is not here”.

We know him, but we do not know all there is to know about him. Joyfully we dare to speak of him, but we do not own all there is to say about him.

As St Paul said in his famous passage from I Corinthians;
for all that we do know as true, still we see in a glass darkly.

The great 17th century Anglican divine, Richard Hooker, wrote that while it is life to know God and *“joy to make mention of his name, yet our soundest knowledge is to know that we know him not as in deed he is... and our safest eloquence is our silence”*^[ii].

And so, said the great theologian our words should be *“warie and fewe”*.

For Christians, Easter provides the heart and distinctive of faith. But it also humbles our arrogant certainty through the message of the Angel, that henceforth Christ will always be beyond our full knowing and familiarity, will always be beyond our easy comprehension and control:

“He is not here. He is risen”, the Angel said to the women.

Sadly, black and white superficial certainty is a problem, not just for religion.

These are times when as a society we are facing profound and complex issues, many of them profoundly values laden, and yet under the present leadership of both sides of Australian politics, debate on those complex issues of meaning, direction and values, seems to be pushing new boundaries of black-and-whiteness, superficiality and name calling.

We might blame it on the digital age;
after all how much nuance can you put in 140 characters of twitter?

But let's not blame the technology.
Technological innovation is part of life and our choice is how to use it and whether we use it well.

So if we are to genuinely engage as a nation
with the complex issues of our time,
then there is a challenge to find the space and the ways,
to have those important national debates with generosity and nuance,
without succumbing to black and whiteness
sloganism and political fundamentalism.

“He is not here. He is risen”, the Angel said to the women.
“Come see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his
disciples”.

The encounter with Easter sends the women on a journey of joy but it
is also a journey into the unknown,
a journey, as Rowan Williams put it so well,
whose turnings we do not know in advance.

That’s a disturbing call for many of us in the traditional churches,
inclined as we are, and as the women in the Gospel narrative were,
to linger at the grave looking for the familiar presence of days gone
by;
we long to linger in familiar places even when they are no longer the
places of life,

Yes, Easter does provide for us the heart and distinctive of faith
to which we must continually cling.

But it also calls us into the journey of strange turnings,
of going and telling, of mission;
a journey in which we must be open to those surprising turnings,
in which we find the presence of Christ afresh
in surprising places and in surprising ways.

For the Church, Easter is not just foundational memory.
It is the call to be new once more,
to hear the word that addresses our fears,
that calls us from the grave
and into the world’s uncertainties again.

“He is not here. He is risen”, the Angel said to the women.
“Come see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples”.

^[i] Rowan Williams’ first Easter Sermon as Archbishop of Canterbury

^[ii] Hooker’s Ecclesiastical Polity.