

## STEALING WHEELBARROWS

**PREACHER : The Very Revd Adrian Newman, Dean**

Sunday, April 4<sup>th</sup> 2010

**Easter Day**

10.30am

Rochester Cathedral

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Here's a story set just after the second world war at Portsmouth dockyard. One day a Ministry of Defence policeman stopped a worker who was walking out of the dockyard gates pushing a wheelbarrow with a suspicious looking package in it. The policeman opened the package and found it contained nothing but some old bits of rubbish, sawdust and floor-sweepings.

The next day he stopped the same worker who was again pushing a wheelbarrow containing a suspicious looking package. Once more it contained nothing of any value. The same thing happened several days on the trot, until the policeman finally said, 'OK, I give up. I know you are up to something, but I just can't tell what. Please, I promise not to arrest you, but put me out of my misery; tell me what you are stealing.' The worker smiled, leaned towards the policeman and whispered: "I'm stealing wheelbarrows."

Some things in life are almost too obvious to see, and easily missed.

Have a look on page 10 of your service paper - here are 3 pictures that form part of a famous psychological experiment. The experiment works like this. The two pictures on the left, of the old woman and the young woman, are handed out at random to a group of people, so that half of the group has a picture of an old woman and half has a picture of a young woman. They are asked to study their picture for a minute or so. Then everyone is shown the picture on the right, and they are immediately asked to say how old the woman in the picture is. Time and again when this experiment is done, those who have been 'pre-programmed' with the picture of a young woman will say the woman in the 3<sup>rd</sup> picture is in her 20s, while those exposed to the picture of an old woman will place the woman in the 3<sup>rd</sup> picture in her 70s.

I hope you can see both a young woman and an old woman emerging from the 3<sup>rd</sup> picture. It's a simple experiment, which demonstrates how significantly we interpret the world through a lens that is determined by our culture, where and when we live, our background, upbringing, education and peer pressure. We like to think of ourselves as rational and objective people, but the truth is we are not a blank canvas. Our view of the world will depend to a very significant extent on how we have been programmed to look at it.

There are often different ways to look at and understand the realities of life as we experience them. Remember the wheelbarrows.

On this Easter Sunday I want to apply this very simple observation to the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

We have a tendency, even in the church, to marginalise the resurrection. Liturgically, we have this great emphasis on Lent, Passion and Holy Week. We spend 3 hours in front of the Cross on Good Friday. We do suffering well, perhaps because it resonates so closely with our experiences in life. But we hardly do resurrection at all.

Once we move into the season after Easter we don't dwell long on the resurrection.

I think this betrays the fact that we're uncomfortable with it. David Jenkins, former Bishop of Durham, once famously described the popular theological view of the Resurrection as no more than 'a conjuring trick with bones'.

The resurrection is so far beyond our human experience that, of course, we will be uncomfortable with it. Human beings do not, generally speaking, come back to life from the dead.

Any of us raised with the critical mindset of western scientific, rational thought will therefore spin a variety of plates in our hands:

- the early disciples were simple men, there were other explanations for what happened but they took the path of least resistance;
- the psychology of resurrection is powerful. If you come to be convinced that Jesus is alive you'll write this back into the events themselves and remember them in a particular way that makes sense of your current experiences.
- history is always written by the winners. Different interpretations of these events got lost as, over the years, a powerful orthodoxy emerged.

I tell you, I could go on spinning these sorts of plates for ever.

But go back to those illustrations of the young/old woman at the start. We are children of our time, programmed to read these events in a particular way. What if that programming is wrong? What if we've missed the wheelbarrows disappearing before our eyes?

It is hard to escape the transformation of the first disciples from frightened, uneducated, powerless, ineffectual men to a group of people who changed the world. The resurrection is the key. It is very difficult to explain the change and transformation within these ordinary men, except by virtue of the **extraordinary** thing they had witnessed.

Remember, these were people who had heard the amazing words of the sermon on the mount at first hand and not been changed; seen extraordinary miracles happen before their eyes and not been changed; spent 3 years in the close company of the most remarkable and inspirational man to walk the planet. But those things didn't change them. No, it was the experience of the resurrection.

This is an event that cannot be ignored.

Do you remember that little detail in the Resurrection story, that the big stone had been rolled away from the tomb?

We naturally think the point is that it was rolled away so that Jesus could get out. But we're wrong. Time and again the gospel writers are at pains to tell us that Jesus after the resurrection inhabits a completely new dimension - he appears through locked doors, jumps alarmingly through time and space completely against the laws of physics, thermo-dynamics and everyday experience. They clearly didn't think he needed to move the stone to get out of the tomb.

So why do they record it being rolled away?

It was not rolled away so that Jesus could get out. It was rolled away so that we could look in. This is for **our** benefit, not his.

The rolled stone is an invitation to all disciples down the ages to come close, and look inside the empty tomb, and ever thereafter see the world differently.

I remember doing this in the garden tomb in Jerusalem a few years ago. It's a powerful moment. It makes you think. And it forces you to apply the logic of the resurrection to your life as you walk away from the rolled stone. If this tomb is empty, what are the implications for my life and for our world?

In a few weeks' time I will be going on sabbatical, the first I have taken in 25 years of being ordained.

The word 'Sabbatical' derives from our word 'sabbath', the principle of one day in seven that is **not** devoted to work, or earning a living, but making a life

- rest
- renewal
- worship
- orienting our lives around the important things, God and our neighbour

'Sabbath' involves stepping out of the circle of our usual routine in order to see things afresh, to get perspective, to glimpse context. It allows us to put first things first.

In Jewish culture the Sabbath was - and is - a Saturday. Christianity hijacked the principle of Sabbath and moved it to Sunday. Why? Quite simply, because Sunday was the day of the week that Jesus rose from the dead.

Sunday is the day of Resurrection. Sabbaths are like rolling back the stone and looking into the empty tomb for the first time, and reminding ourselves a) that it's true, b) what the implications are.

We're not just meant to do this every Easter, but regularly, as part of a pattern in our lives.

That's why we go to church each week and celebrate the eucharist. It's a weekly reminder of the resurrection. It alters perspective.

C S Lewis once summed up the meaning of Easter like this:

***"I believe in the resurrection of Jesus, in the same way as I believe the sun rose this morning; not only because I can see it, but because now I see everything else in the light of it."***

This Easter Sunday, as we gaze in past the rolled stone to the empty tomb, can we see the wheelbarrows disappearing before our eyes? Can we see past our pre-programmed tendencies and glimpse both the young and the old woman in the picture?

The stone is rolled away for our benefit, inviting us afresh to gaze in, ponder the scene before us, and walk away seeing the world around us with a vision freshly born.