

We could most certainly be forgiven for wondering whether talking of Easter joy or Easter victory, or even just wishing someone a happy Easter, might sound more than a little hollow at a time when the UK is recording alarmingly high death tolls on a daily basis. Not only hollow, it might even sound totally heartless.

But on another level, let's recognise that the first Easter and Easter 2020 have more in common than we might suspect. We today are surrounded by uncertainties. Will my friend so and so get the virus? How long will this lockdown last? Similarly, after three years following Jesus had apparently come to such an abrupt and terrible end, those who loved Jesus felt quite rudderless. What do we do now? they must have asked.

Also, at the time of writing this, our Prime Minister is in hospital. Some people have therefore raised the spectre of a government without adequate leadership. The whole Jesus movement **had** lost their leader. Without him, the whole thing fell apart completely. It lost all meaning.

Those who had been following Jesus were also bitterly disappointed. They had invested so much of themselves in this man. They had believed him to be far more than a man. And now he was dead. It had all come to nothing. I'm sure all of us can really feel for those people who have built up businesses that will not survive this period of lockdown and economic inactivity. For some, it will feel like years of work have been cruelly brought to nothing.

And am I pushing the analogy too far to talk of self-isolation? Maybe a bit, but not much. Once Jesus had been publicly discredited and put to death, his followers, we are told, spent nearly all of their time behind locked doors. They were scared. The authorities might well come looking for them as well.

So maybe today has a lot in common with the situation people found themselves in at the first Easter. But we have to ask the question: what difference did Easter Sunday make to those first followers? And what difference did it not make? And therefore, what difference does it make to us now?

One thing is for sure. The dawning realisation that Jesus was alive again did not make those early believers' lives any more straightforward. On the contrary. They soon found themselves in dangerous situations as they set about making the resurrection known. And there is plenty of documentary evidence that most of them lost their lives as a result. Easter doesn't make life any more comfortable. Pain is still pain. Grief is still grief.

On another level, the events of Easter Day changed everything for those first disciples. From Easter Day onwards, they developed a new certainty about their belief in Jesus, a breathtaking new fearlessness and an extraordinary optimism. Peter, who had in effect run away hours before the crucifixion once he realised he might be in danger, is seen, in the period after the resurrection, standing up quite fearlessly and telling the people of Jerusalem that they had failed to recognise who Jesus was and that they'd better recognise it now. His fear had completely gone.

Similarly, they had for a brief period been leaderless, but now they realised that their leader was alive and was indeed who they had believed him to be. They had felt that everything they had invested in following Jesus had been wasted. Now, they knew that none of it had been wasted, and set about the task of building the church with real passion and determination.

I genuinely believe that only the resurrection could possibly have turned the situation around so dramatically.

But Easter is not just about an event. It is also intensely personal. One of Jesus' first words after He has risen is when He is looking at the distraught Mary Magdalene, and he simply says her name. "Mary". What warmth, what reassurance, what power in that one word ! Her sense of bitter disappointment suddenly replaced by a deeply personal certainty that the one who had turned her life around was still firmly in control. Incidentally, if the gospel writers were wanting to make up the stories of the resurrection, and wanting to make them sound convincing, they would never have had a woman as the first witness. At that time, women were not even allowed to give testimony in a court of law. John writing of Mary as the first witness only makes sense if it actually happened that way. "Mary". I hope that for some people, even in this insecure and at times frightening period, this Easter will give them personally a new assurance, a new fearlessness about death and a new purpose for life now.

But back to today and we recognize that both here and all around the globe many families are mourning the loss of loved ones who have succumbed to the Corona virus. Their grief intensified because most of these deaths will maybe have occurred without the presence of loved ones to be beside them.

So too, I am certain that everyone here will at some point have experienced the death of someone close. As some of you will know Judith and I share this experience having tragically lost our daughter just under two years ago. The pain of that was and still is immense and raw. Easter does not take away the sense of loss and tragedy but it does mean that the darkness is penetrated by the light. Our unshakeable belief that our daughter is at peace and that we will see her again – and hug and laugh with her again – does make it all a lot easier. Christ's resurrection has shown us that death is the one that has lost.

But Easter Sunday is even more than that. It is that everything that is destructive in our world has been proved to be weaker than God, weaker than good. Easter really does change everything. As the writer C.S. Lewis expressed it, because of Easter Sunday "Jesus has forced open a door that had been locked. He has met, fought and beaten the King of Death. Everything is different because He has done so."

Happy Easter, everybody.