

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb (Luke 24:1)

Back when I was at school - I went to an old-fashioned grammar school back in the pre-computer age - each teacher had a punishment log for the year. Most teachers ran their year from September to July and would throw their punishment log away at the beginning of the Summer holiday. Our RE teacher - Rev. Kelly - kept his from Easter to Easter. On Easter Sunday he threw his punishment log away. I thought that was just a little eccentricity at the time. Now I understand - It was the first day.

On the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb. It's a phrase pregnant with new hope and new beginnings. Those women who came with their spices to prepare the body of Christ didn't know it, but they were about to experience a whole new beginning; for themselves, for their friends who had been left devastated by the events of Good Friday. On the first day of the week they came, at early dawn. This was the first moment when they could come. The day before had been the Sabbath - the seventh day - and they had kept the Jewish Law. They had stayed in their homes and done no work. Now, though, they were coming to the tomb and their lives would be reshaped, renewed. It was the first day.

Sometimes we Christians talk about keeping the Sabbath on a Sunday. And sometimes we've made a drear dreech thing of what we have called "the Sabbath". There have been places in Scotland where we have chained up the swings in the park, have banned anything that might smack of cheerfulness. But you know what? We Christians haven't kept the Sabbath for 1700 years. The Sabbath was yesterday - the seventh day of the week. Yes, I know, "picky picky picky" - but I have a point coming; bear with me. This is the first day - hang onto that for a moment. See, back in the years immediately following that first Easter the earliest Christians were all Jews. They did keep the Sabbath as their ancestors always had; but they also started to meet on Sunday as followers of Christ, and they would gather on the day of the week when Jesus had risen - on the first day.

The second Isaiah had written of God speaking of making a new Heaven and a new Earth where former things were not remembered or brought to mind. This is what happened in the rising of Jesus. On that first day when those women came to the tomb expecting to find nothing other than death, hopelessness and a broken body they found, in the words of the two dazzling men, the prospect of healing, of renewed hope, of new life. And that is what we are gathered here for this morning is all about. Here, this morning, in this place, we gather - as countless Christians have gathered over twice a thousand years, as countless Christians are gathered today across the world. Here, this morning, in this place we gather to greet the risen Christ. Here, this morning, in this place we gather in the new light of a new day; in the new light of Heaven shining in the resurrected Christ on a new Earth where death shall have no dominion, where there is new hope for dark days and where the heart of humanity can find healing. We gather, as our ancestors always have, on the first day.

What were we thinking when we made a drear dreech thing of a Sunday, when we chained up the swings and confined folk to their homes to reflect on their sins? This is the first day - this is not a day to wallow in our sinfulness and despair of our flawed humanity; this is a day to rejoice and sing and laugh with joy for our sins are forgotten and we are offered again, clean and bright and new, the prospect of what we can be - what humanity can be - by the grace of God. The prospect that we can be what we are truly meant to be - the children of God.

It's a cliché, I know, but it's no less true for all that. Today is the first day of the rest of your life. However old you are, or young; however weak you think you are, or powerful; however sinful you think you are, or how good, today is the first day of the rest of your life? What will you do with today?

Are their relationships that need a bit of repairing? You don't have to answer that. Relationships, sometimes, need a first day. I know of a man who had a son - back in the 1950s - who got into trouble with the law. He threw him out of the house and they never really talked again for the rest of their lives. I can think of nothing sadder than that. There comes a time, sometimes, to let go and forgive - a time to reach out and let bygones be bygones. It's not necessarily easy, but life isn't always. But today is the first day - the day when women came to the tomb of Christ and found it empty and discovered that all sorts of things are possible with God that they never imagined.

And not just with individual relationships. Sometimes whole nations and communities can find peace and reconciliation - can find new life and healing - and set aside the enmities of the past through the grace of God. Let me offer you South Africa. When I was a kid in that grammar school in the 70s it was the time of the Soweto riots. The smart people, the clever people, the experts - they all predicted a bloodbath. Apartheid would collapse and there would be civil war. No. Instead that country experienced a new beginning when old hatreds were set aside and the brutalities of the past were recognised and let go of. If you can think of anything more resonant with what the Gospel of Jesus Christ is all about, let me know. South Africa experienced its new beginning - its first day.

In this part of the world I grew up in the 70s when the IRA were planting bombs all over Britain. Parcel bombs were big then. The smart people, the clever people, the experts - they all predicted that there would be no end to it all. Hatred was now too ingrained in the population of Northern Ireland. No. Instead there has been - with a few difficult times - peace for 15 years and people drive across the border with scarcely ever a check. On Good Friday 15 years ago Northern Ireland experienced its new beginning - its first day.

We are gathered here this morning to greet the risen Christ. God is remaking the world anew and all the stuff that has tied us down, has made us feel small and unworthy and broken can be done away with. Let us rejoice. But there's a challenge here as well, for the doomsayers are still among us. There are the smart people, the clever people, the experts who will tell you that we are bound to economic systems that divide the rich from the poor and that they cannot change. Or

that we are “hard-wired” to protect our own interests against those who seem strange or different.

Well, I don't know how smart or clever I am, and I'm no expert, but I believe that one day there will be no poverty, there will no be racial hatred or prejudice. I believe that one day peace will come and we will study war no more and everyone will look after their neighbour. And I believe that because we stand in the light of a newborn day; we stand in the light that shone on Easter morning; we gather in the light of of the risen Christ. The is the first day of the rest of your life. For you, for me, for humanity this is the first day. What are we going to do with it?

Lord, we gather to greet your resurrected Son. May we find new hope, a fresh start and new confidence to live as your children