**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the Lord. (Psalm 118. 17)

The gospel message of the resurrection begins with fear, confusion and amazement. Unlike many of the other events about Jesus in the gospels which the New Testament writers saw pre-figured in events in the Old Testament, the resurrection of Jesus is so startling and so new that there are no precedents to draw on. This is why the bit in Psalm 118 about the stone that the builders rejected becoming the chief cornerstone was so influential for the early Church. God was doing something entirely new.

This is also why the Gospel story itself is so important: because it communicated brilliantly the perplexed astonishment over what happened on that first Easter Day.

Chris and I were mulling only last week about the sense in having Good Friday as a Bank Holiday in an age when most people don’t know anything of what it signifies. And then we moved on to wondering about Easter Monday as a Bank Holiday too – which is nothing to do with the Easter story. … Until we thought, well maybe the first disciples really needed Easter Monday to recover from the shenanigans of the resurrection……….

First, Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb. She goes to anoint the body of Jesus. He is dead – of course he is; she watched him die - so she doesn’t expect to find anything other than a corpse. But the stone is rolled away and the body somehow gone. She runs and fetches Peter and John. At first none of them knows what to think. They are completely overwhelmed by fear and confusion.

John half believes; maybe he has some vestige of memory about something Jesus had told them, however obliquely. He and Peter depart. Goodness knows why they just…. wander off back home, but that is what we are told. Mary continues to linger at the tomb, weeping. When something makes her stop and peer inside. The men had presumably attested to the fact that only the grave clothes were in there – the linen wrapping and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, but she wanted to see for herself. And there she finds not one but two angels, all dressed in white. As if that weren’t fantastical enough, she turns round and comes face to face with someone she believes to be the gardener, and it is only when he speaks her name that she recognises him as the Risen Christ. And off she goes to tell Peter and the others.

Why didn’t she recognise him? Context, maybe? Jesus was the last person she expected to see. Or tears? She was newly-bereaved and blurry-eyed with crying. Or something different about Jesus himself even? Resurrection might just be an experience that changes a person? …

Till this point in the story the followers of Jesus would have been feeling all sorts of things: embarrassment and regret at their cowardice – they ran away, remember, when Jesus was arrested; guilt at their betrayals and denials; but also relief. At last it is all over. The great hopes that they had placed in Jesus as The One, the Messiah, who would make all things right are now also dead; nailed to the cross and lost forever.

But the strange events of this night, and a realisation which dawns with the new day, is altogether more disturbing. A bit like the World Cup Final in 1966, they thought it was all over. But it was only just beginning.

And the message itself is not clear or obvious. The Risen Jesus is either not seen at all, or seen and not recognised. He is both the same person – the one who was crucified; and a different person, alive with a new and more awesome and more challenging sort of life. And for everyone involved, going back to how things were is no longer an option. That is frightening, disturbing. His risen presence is both beyond us and beside us.

The first message of Easter, delivered from the empty tomb is this: ‘He is not here. He is risen.’ He is beyond us. And then, looking ahead, we find him in the garden, on the road, by the beach, and in other ordinary ways. Beside us. Even as he leaves to go beyond us to the Father, he says that he will also be with us.

But for us today, what does this mean? It means that we must look for Jesus not just where he has been, and not just in what is familiar, but beyond ourselves, and beyond our present understandings. He is going before us, and we will find him in ways that challenge. And in all this we are called to be his witnesses.

No wonder the first disciples were frightened. No wonder Mary Magdalene clings onto Jesus. (We will come to the bit about him saying: Do not hold on to me at some stage in the near future I should think). No wonder we are fearful when we consider what it means really to follow him.

I wish I had paid more attention in A Level English, but R.S. Thomas, who was a priest as well as a poet, in his poem Pilgrimages, put it like this: He is such a fast God, Always there before us and leaving as we arrive.

So anyone feeling uncertain, doubtful and fearful about this Easter faith of ours, know that you are in good company, because that is precisely how the first disciples felt on the first Easter day. The risen life that we see in Jesus changes everything. It changed the hearts and lives of those who followed Jesus then. It changes the lives of those of us who follow him now.

The truth of his resurrection can never be demonstrated or proved in a way that will be neat and tidy or scientifically conclusive. It will always be ambiguous, uncomfortable, daunting even, because, just as it was then, it will be communicated through the medium of human lives – our lives today - as we seek to let ourselves be guided and led by the priorities and purposes of God, who in the death and resurrection of Christ offers new beginnings and fresh hope to a broken world.

And by a quirk of fate, this Easter Day is also April Fools’ Day. Those of you looking for an elaborate prank – like spaghetti growing on trees – will be disappointed, I’m afraid. I’m not creative enough for that. But in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has the last laugh on sin and death. Everything that looked to have been defeated or lost on Friday is alive and kicking on Sunday: the stone which the builders rejected has indeed become the cornerstone of something new.

So here is the challenge of Easter faith. To live as Easter people – people who, though we can’t understand what happened, nonetheless believe it did, and live and love as Jesus taught us.

**Amen**