

EASTER SUNDAY 2019

Exeter Cathedral

Preached by the Right Reverend Robert Atwell, *Bishop of Exeter*

Last week in between wall-to-wall coverage of Brexit and the devastating fire that engulfed Notre Dame in Paris, our television screens were for a brief interlude dominated by a fuzzy image from the centre of M87, a galaxy 55 million light years away. Scientists tell us that it is a black hole in the centre of the universe.

The image was of a glowing ring in which particles accelerate to near the speed of light by the crushing gravity of six billion suns. One awed scientist said, 'It is like looking at the gates of hell at the end of space and time'.

For the first time astronomers have been able to look at a perforation in the space-time continuum. The images are not only on the edge of what can be observed, but also on the boundary beyond which our understanding of physics breaks down. These extraordinary pictures testify to the power, the mystery and the beauty of the universe.

One newspaper headline read: 'Humanity gets its first glimpse of a one-way door out of our universe'. Whether or not that is true, modern technology is certainly prompting all sorts of scientific speculation. One question which was not asked last week, at least not in any of the coverage that I read, is why does the universe exist? Does the universe have a purpose? Why is there anything at all? Why not just nothing?

And, of course, those same questions apply to each of us. Why do we exist? Do we have a purpose? Is there any meaning to life?

The writer Arthur C. Clarke, famous for his science fiction novel and film, *2001 Space Odyssey*, wrote that 'two possibilities exist: either we are alone in the universe or we are not. Both are equally terrifying.' As far as I am concerned, only one of those possibilities is terrifying, that we are alone. This is the terrifying possibility that atheists embrace and I respect them for the tenacity with which they hold their view.

As someone who not only believes in God, but who believes in the God who has made himself known uniquely in Jesus Christ, I believe that we are not alone. The wonder behind the wonders of the universe is its unseen Creator, and the fact that this Creator can and does know and love each of his creatures intimately, including you and me.

And it is trust in this God that gives purpose to my life. What we celebrate at Easter is the key which unlocks the mystery of life and gives shape to our hope.

So let me this morning apply the same critique used in recent scientific articles and apply them to the events of Easter and the resurrection: either Jesus Christ rose from the dead or he did not. Both are equally remarkable propositions, though for different reasons.

It would be remarkable if the resurrection of Jesus were a lie – something that only existed as a construct in the minds of his disciples. It is possible, but is it feasible? Does the evidence support the proposition?

It is abundantly clear from the resurrection narratives in all four Gospels that the disciples were terrified following Jesus's crucifixion, fled for their lives and went into hiding. Moreover they were not expecting Jesus's resurrection. It came as a massive shock.

In my view, only the resurrection can explain the transformation of this motley crew of frightened, disillusioned men into the dynamic group of disciples who changed the world. I say men, but of course the real heroes of the story are the women, and in particular Mary Magdalene, who goes to the tomb first thing on Sunday morning while it is still dark to complete the Jewish rituals of burial.

You will remember that by the time Pilate finally gave permission to Joseph of Arimathea to take down Jesus' body from the cross late on Good Friday, it was already getting dark and the Jewish Sabbath was beginning.

In Jerusalem, as soon as the priests blew the *shofar* – the enormous trumpet made out of a ram's horn which was kept in the Temple, signalling the beginning of *Shabbat* – the Sabbath – all work was forbidden. And so it was that Mary Magdalene and the other women come to the tomb before dawn to finish the rituals of burial which had had to be curtailed on Friday night.

But even our hero Mary Magdalene is incredulous and distraught at discovering the tomb empty. If she and the other disciples made up the story of the empty tomb, then we are indeed celebrating the greatest deception in human history.

On the other hand, if the crucified Christ did rise from the dead, then that too is remarkable. Remarkable in what it reveals to us of God's plan and purposes.

Each Sunday in the creed we say that we believe in one God, the creator of heaven and earth. I don't interpret that statement in a fundamentalist way. I'm not a creationist and do not interpret the creation stories in the Bible in a literal way. Contrary to what many think, science and religion are not locked in a fight to the death. You can be a Christian without leaving your brain outside in a box when you go to church.

But if God could make something out of nothing, as science suggests happened with the universe, then surely God can equally overcome death and promise a new future. Belief in the resurrection is as understandable as believing our life has purpose and that it will become part of the life of the world to come.

When we watch programmes about the universe and speculate about the meaning of black holes it's easy to feel insignificant. But the remarkable thing about the resurrection of Jesus Christ is that it means that each of us is significant.

The risen Christ did not go back to being the same person who died on the cross. Yet, at one level, it was the same Jesus. We know that his risen body bore the marks of his crucifixion. The risen Lord is the crucified Jesus, not somebody else. But we also know from the accounts in the Gospels that the risen Christ was different and transformed.

The resurrection does not mean that the crucifixion was some kind of ghastly misunderstanding that we can now leave behind because, as in some sort of cosmic fairy tale, everything worked out in the end and lived happily ever after. The resurrection does not 'un-do' Good Friday, but tells us that the cycles of pain, violence and murder in which we human beings get trapped, do not have the last word.

The message of Easter is that death is final and death is real. But in the resurrection of Jesus God initiates a new creation: everything is being made new and he invites us to share in it. As with Mary Magdalene, he calls each of us by name to become part of the new thing he is doing as the whole cosmos is being renewed.

So we have nothing to fear. We are not alone. We are not insignificant. We matter to God. And that is why we celebrate today. It is why alleluia is our song. The Lord is risen indeed and he bids us follow him to glory.

+ Robert Exon