

Sermon for Sunday 5 April 2026 – Easter Day

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Acts 10.34-43, Psalm 118.14-24, Colossians 3.1-4, John 20.1-18

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Please do be seated.

Some of you know that the approach to Easter this year for me has been coloured by the experience a couple of weeks ago of my father's death, and that has coloured the experience of the story of Holy Week and shaped what I might want to say to you this morning. Particularly as I know that all of us gathered here today have experienced loss in one sense or another, and therefore all of us gather this morning in the presence of God to celebrate Christ's victory over sin and death and claiming his promises for those who are on all of our minds this morning. I'm put in mind of my favourite story in John's Gospel, the story of Martha and Mary and Lazarus. And Martha encounters Jesus at the tomb of her brother Lazarus and says to him — or Jesus says to her, rather — 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live. And everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?' And through her tears and her grief, Martha is able to stumble and mutter out a reply, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.'

Well, I hope you don't think I'm too crazy, but sometimes people tell me that they're consoled when somebody who they love has died by small coincidences that seem to be consoling in some way. Unlikely coincidences in many ways, but things such as a butterfly or a robin landing on a windowsill or an important song suddenly being played on the radio at just the right moment. Things like that, that kind of provide a sense of reassurance and a sense of comfort at a key time. And you'll be rather surprised to know that the story that, or the feature that has comforted me this week has been the experience of hot cross buns.

Now you're going to think that's a bit crazy, but my sister and I were visiting my father as he was dying, and we left the hospital. It was late and we needed to have something to eat. The only thing left in the shop was a packet of mini hot cross buns, which we devoured, four each.

Hot cross buns traditionally are a symbol of Good Friday. And they were traditionally made with a cross on the top to remind us of the cross of Jesus, the spices to remind us of the spices with which he was buried in his tomb, the round circle of the bun, the shape of the stone that sealed the tomb. A few days later, when my father had died, we collapsed, my sisters and I, into the hospital branch of Costa's coffee shop in Ipswich Hospital. And on offer was Costa's new imagining of the hot cross bun, a hot cross bun filled with bacon and chutney. So against my

better judgement, I ate one of these hot cross buns. It was singularly revolting. The flavour of cold bacon chutney and sweet currants in a sweet bun, I think, just about summed up the taste of Good Friday. So whoever in Costa came up with that idea deserves a prize for adequately providing a sense of grief on the taste buds.

Anyway, returning to the story of Mary, Martha and Lazarus. Lazarus was buried in a rock tomb with this large stone rolled across the entrance, just as the tomb of Jesus will be a few days later. And Mary falls at the feet of Jesus and prays words that maybe we can all of us at one time or another make our own. 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' In other words, this wouldn't have happened 'You could have prevented it. You could have done something. This horrible stuff could all have gone away. Why didn't you stop it from happening?' And St John tells us that when Jesus saw her weeping and all of her friends weeping, he himself was deeply disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. And coming to the tomb of Lazarus, he weeps as we do. Love brings us to tears. And Jesus loved his friends, and he wept with his friends at the graveside.

But then, speaking to Martha and Mary, Jesus says to them, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?' One of the repeated phrases that people have written to me in cards this week is to quote from St Paul's letter to the Thessalonians, words from the Bible which are words of encouragement when we are faced with loss. And it was these words that people wrote several times to me. St Paul writing to the Thessalonians: 'We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words.'

Do not grieve as others do who have no hope. Hope's a very important word in the Bible. In the Bible, hope is an expression of our confident, joyful expectation and our firm assurance in the promises of God. It's not just wishful thinking, it's far more than that. Hope is based on the character of God. It's based on the resurrection of Jesus. It provides encouragement for perseverance, joy, and peace in difficult times. The prayer of committal in the church's funeral service says, 'In sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life.'

I think I've mentioned before in a sermon here that when Princess Diana died, The Times asked bishop Nigel McCulloch, who was Bishop of Wakefield at the time, to write an article. And he wrote that our Christian faith is of the sure and certain hope of the resurrection of the dead. But The Times took out the words 'sure' and 'certain' and just wrote the word 'hope', which in other words is to say that the Christian faith is wishful thinking. But biblical hope isn't wishful thinking, it is sure and and certain because we believe in a God who is faithful and just. A God who

doesn't just make vague promises, but a God who in Christ Jesus enters decisively into the human condition, our condition, lives among us, dies as one of us, dies for us, and rises again. St Paul wrote to the church in Corinth: 'In fact, Christ Jesus has been raised from the dead, the first-fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being. For as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.'

The word first-fruits means that Jesus is the first of a great harvest of which we will all be a part. Jesus will claim us all as his own. And St John records some other words of Jesus: 'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places, and if it were not so, would I have told you? But I'm going to prepare a place for you, and if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I'm going.' And the way is our faith, our hope, and our trust in Christ Jesus and in his promises.

So the grounds for our sure and certain hope are that we have the experience of our own faith, our own walk with God, the walk that our loved ones have shared, the joy of knowing that God is faithful, the whole history of the church, that we don't hold this faith vainly or alone, but we are members of a faith that has been proven true throughout history and in the evidence around us, perhaps in the beauty of creation, in our prayers, and in our worship.

So St John tells us that Jesus has authority over death. I love it when he comes to the tomb of Lazarus, and with a loud voice he commands the dead, Lazarus, come out! And the dead man stumbles out into the light at the sound of the voice of Jesus. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?

The dark, colourless, death-filled Good Friday is transformed by the risen Christ into the life and the colour and the joy of Easter Day. Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb, travelling through the graveyard like a ghost in the darkness of the early dawn. But she runs away from the tomb, having met her risen Lord, as the sun rises and the sleeping flowers lift their heads and the first birds of the morning sing. The stone is rolled away and Jesus is risen.

I began by telling you that a hot cross bun can taste like Good Friday. So coming back to hot cross buns, the BBC very helpfully did some research, very important research, which they published a couple of days ago about the transformation of the hot cross bun from something very ordinary into something really special. So did you know that you can buy a hot cross bun and you can have dark chocolate or apple and cinnamon, red velvet, apple or Wensleydale cheese, orange marmalade, salted caramel, rhubarb and ginger, and even — and this sounds

my favourite, but I've never had one — custard-filled tiramisu-flavoured hot cross buns. Can you imagine?

But the most popular hot cross bun of 2026 From Shaw's Bakery, located in West Yorkshire, very close to where I used to live with my family, Shaw's Bakery, their treacle tart flavoured hot cross bun sales have gone up 800% this year. And perhaps some of us have enjoyed homemade hot cross buns with melted butter this morning, or we will do later. Is not the contrast between cold bacon and chutney and all those Smorgasbord of mouth-tinglingly glorious flavours, a good illustration of the transformation of Good Friday to Easter Day. The stone rolled away, the fullness and joy of creation released upon the world in all those different flavours bursting upon the taste buds. I think so.

Mary and Martha came to the tomb of Lazarus in confusion and doubt and grief, but leave the tomb with a life restored in joy and bewildered happiness as they praise God for his blessings. Mary Magdalene, who came with no hope whatsoever, races away from the tomb shouting, 'I've seen the risen Lord!'

These are some words from a song written last year by a songwriter called Phil Wickham. Let's finish with these words. 'This we believe, that we have a Father, Creator who was and who is and will be, who sent us his Son and poured out his Spirit with power to heal, resurrect, and redeem. The song of the saints forever will be: Glory to God the Father, glory to Christ the risen one, all hail the King, with heaven sing Alleluia. This we believe, that we have a Saviour, Jesus the Christ, for our sin crucified. Oh yes, we believe that on the third morning gone was the stone, for he rose back to life. Forever he reigns, let his praise fill the skies. Glory to God the Father, glory to Christ the risen one. All hail the King, with heaven sing. Hallelujah.'

As a very final thought, this morning as I travelled to Preston Church for our sunrise service, I looked back at Lavenham just as Graham had raised the church flag, and over the church tower, like a huge cosmic hot cross bun in the sky, was the glorious moon, just reminding us of the beauty of creation and the life-infused wonderful world in which we live. In Jesus' name. Amen.