

## **Sermon by Christopher Armstrong given at the Easter Communion**

**on 1st April 2018 at St Peter's Church Barrowden.**

Imagine your favourite Easter Egg today, empty of chocolates. How will you react? You might be puzzled; you might look round for the family member who has hidden the contents or, if you shoot from the hip, you might even fire off an email to the manufacturer to complain. And all because we expect these days to find our Easter Eggs full. Just like our tombs. We expect to find them full – and none more so than the tomb of Jesus. When the women walk to the tomb in order to embalm the body after the hasty burial on the Friday, the day before the Sabbath, they found the tomb empty. Of that there can be no doubt. All 4 gospel writers agree. Had the tomb been full then there would be no Christian Gospel. Such a story would indeed be an idle tale for the proof against the resurrection would be staring the disciples in the face.

We have to realise on this Easter Day in the third millennium that the empty tomb does not create belief. Rather, it creates puzzlement, fear, surprise, wonder, curiosity. In fact, Mark's gospel ends with the words, "they were afraid", which is not the best start to good news.

Jesus had preached that he would be raised from the dead but that was a common hope in the first century mind. It was associated with the general resurrection on the last day. They had not heard Jesus accurately. The raising of a single person was contrary to their expectations. So they were surprised, fearful, terrified at the discovery of an empty tomb.

In our gospel today, St. Mark uses women as the first witnesses of the empty tomb and also the first messengers to share the news with the disciples and Peter. Now women were seen as unreliable witnesses in the 1st century but the gospels take a different view. St Luke in particular is the champion of the marginalized and makes the point that even women, even the socially inferior, can be messengers of good news. However, the apostles don't believe them. To them it was an idle tale, though the Greek is stronger still: they were delirious.

So the tomb is empty. This is a severe embarrassment to St. Matthew for in his gospel account the Romans mount a guard outside the tomb precisely to ensure the disciples don't come and snatch the body away. The guards thus have a lot of explaining to do.

The tomb is empty – not a reason for belief but a prelude to belief. The body of Jesus has not been found though we can assume that it was the most sought after corpse in the world. The empty tomb doesn't convince any of the disciples that Jesus is alive and it plays no part in the earliest evidence for the Resurrection that comes from St. Paul. No. The empty tomb doesn't convey belief. The most reliable evidence for the Resurrection comes next when scattered groups of disciples experience the presence of Christ as well as Paul and his anti-Christian Jewish friends on extermination missions. Both Jewish and Roman histories record this exceptional event and its implications right outside their area of interest and even contrary to it. Finally, the most conclusive proof of all is us here today, the Easter people, those who have met and experienced the risen Lord in some way or another. The sooner we can learn the language of resurrection experiences – not just that of the

empty tomb but how peoples' lives are changed by Christ – the sooner our friends will see and believe. Amen.