

Easter Sunday

Yogi Berra, New York Yankee's famous baseball player between 1946 and 1965, was famous for his 'one liners':

"You better cut the pizza in four pieces. I'm not hungry enough to eat eight."

"I knew exactly where it was, I just couldn't find it."

"We're lost, but we're making great time!"

"If you come to a fork in the road, take it."

"I knew I was going to take the wrong train, so I left early."

But perhaps the most famous of his one-liners is,

"It ain't over till it's over."

I am sure that Europe's Ryder Cup golf team, in 2012, Sugar Ray Leonard, in his fight against Thomas Hearns in 1981, Stephen Hendry in his World Snooker Final against Jimmy White in 1992, England's test cricket team against Australia at Headingley in 1981 and Liverpool football team in their Champions League Final against AC Milan in 2005 would all agree that it ain't over till its over.

It ain't over till its over. They thought, with the betrayal of Friday, it was over. Think of the mix of emotions present since Good Friday. The soldiers were pleased they had done their duty. They had killed Jesus as instructed, mocked Him, gambled over His clothes, cut His body down and given it to a stranger. They were now frustrated that they had to secure His tomb. Cephas and the chief priests, Herod and Pilate were relieved that everything was over. No longer a threat, Jesus had been dealt with permanently and the disturbances, ritual trial, execution, were all over and normality could resume quickly. Anxiety kicked in when they thought of securing the tomb against the threat of malicious, dangerous stories about Jesus coming back to life; nothing that couldn't be fixed by rolling an immovable stone in front of the cave. And the disciples and women present at Jesus' death! The guilt of failure, fear of being the next ones killed, depression and sadness of losing a friend and master as well as despondency for a bleak and uncertain future! The mix of Good Friday emotions was incredible. It was all over, over between them and God. It had all gone too far.

As we know, it wasn't over. On the first Easter, Jesus came back to the very same people who had disappointed Him, misunderstood Him, denied knowing Him and fled, from Him into the darkness of the night. He didn't return to Cephas or Herod or Pilate. He didn't appear in the palaces and royal court but in the garden, the Upper Room, on the road to Emmaus. Now we have a new mix of emotions, from the resignation and despair of his followers at the tomb, through disbelief, confusion and fear, to sheer joy and elation when they recognise Jesus is standing in front of them.

Recently I read one of Bishop Tom Wright's Easter sermons that he began by stating that once you get the resurrection straight, all else eventually falls into place; a point brought home to him the year before when he was in a cab, stuck in London traffic. The taxi driver, seeing that Tom Wright was a bishop, commented on what a difficult time Anglicans were having over the issue of women bishops. Bishop Wright agreed that it was difficult time. Then came the moment he will never forget. "Turning round to face me," the bishop said, "we were, as I say, stationary in the traffic – the driver said, 'What I always say is this: If God raised Jesus Christ from the dead, everything else is basically rock'n'roll, i'n'it?' For Tom Wright this was a great gospel moment.

It wasn't over on Good Friday. But it's not over on Easter Day either. It would be easy for us, used to the dangerous mix of emotions, attitudes and actions of our modern world, to think that the point of Easter is to provide a joyful ending after the

heartbreak of the week before OR EVEN to assure us that, with death, life is not over. John's Gospel tells us something more powerful and challenging. Bishop Wright, in his sermon, I quoted earlier, said: "Without the message of faith and love which Easter contains we are nothing, but with that message the world opens up before us as a strange, unmapped new land, full of possibilities and challenges. The disciples are not to stay in the locked room. 'Peace be with you,' says Jesus again. 'As the father has sent me, so I'm sending you.' There are no locked doors in the kingdom of God."

Interestingly Mark's version ends ambiguously? The Jerusalem Bible translation, of Ch 16 v 8 tells us that 'the women came out and ran away from the tomb because they were frightened out of their wits; and they said nothing to a soul, for they were afraid.' We clearly know they did tell someone, but maybe Mark left this particular part of the story deliberately ambiguous to give us a challenge. We are the ones left to tell the story. We are part of the Easter story, we have been challenged to tell it.

It can be a frightening. Forty years ago in Uganda, on Easter Day 1973, with Idi Amin in power, pastor Sempangi's memory was imprinted with faces burned beyond recognition, soldiers beating innocent people and the sound of boots crushing bones. He prayed his Easter sermon would make a difference. Afterwards five men, from the State Research Bureau's secret police followed him into the vestry and closed the door. Sempangi turned to see five rifles pointed at his face. "We are going to kill you," the leader said. "if you have something to say, say it now." Sempangi shakily said: "I do not need to plead my cause. I am a dead man already. My life is dead and hidden in Christ. So if I die, I'll be alive. It is your lives that are in danger; you are dead in your sins. I will pray that after you have killed me, God will spare you from eternal destruction." Looking at him the leader curiously lowered his gun ordering his men to follow. "Will you pray for us?" he asked. Fearing a trick, Sempangi asked them to close their eyes. "Father in heaven," he prayed, "Forgive these men. Do not let them die in their sins but bring them closer to you." Sempangi waited for the men to pull the triggers. The leader spoke: "You have helped us. Do not fear. We will protect you. You will be safe." God's love had given Sempangi the strength to say a simple, life-changing prayer for 5 assassins and himself. 7000 people, in church, were changed forever. He really does live, doesn't He? He's not in that tomb. Thank God He was in Sempangi's church that Easter. And He's here, with you and me.

Horrifying situations like this continue to occur but thank God most are not as frightening as this. Amazing Easter experiences happen on a daily basis. We hear and read about many; we know and experience many others. Like the man who lost both his legs, his left arm and all but one finger and a thumb from his right arm, in a car accident, writing letters twice a week to men in prison. He never heard back; he was told he wouldn't but into every letter he put his whole experience, faith, wit and Christian optimism. He did hear back once, a short letter on official paper. It said: "please write on the best paper you can afford. Your letters are passed from cell to cell till they literally fall to pieces." The multi-millionaire Christian businessman scrapped his notes when asked to speak to a class of 60 sixth grade youngsters in a poor American township where most students would not finish formal school and decided to speak from his heart. "Stay in school," he encouraged them, "and I'll help pay the college fees for every one of you." At that moment the lives of these students changed. For the first time they had hope. Said one student, "I had something to look forward to and waiting for me." 90% of that class went on to graduate from high school. There's the crew of an inner city church's soup kitchen huddled together for a prayer before opening the door to let the hungry street people in when an elderly African lady says: 'Lord we know you'll be comin' through the line today, so help us treat You well'. There are so, so many, from the smallest to largest scale. It is our

challenge to be out there, making even the smallest things happen, not waiting for permission, encouragement or the ideal time. The resurrection message of love and inexhaustible hope becomes real and we become part of the Easter experience. He really does live, doesn't He? He's not in that tomb. He is alive and with us now.

The good news is that Jesus died and rose for all of us. One of my favourite prayers, expresses this: 'Father of all, we give you thanks and praise, that when we were still far off you met us in your Son and brought us home. Dying and living, he declared your love, gave us grace, and opened the gate of glory.' The prayer continues: 'May we who share Christ's body live his risen life; we who drink his cup bring life to others; we whom the Spirit lights give light to the world. Keep us firm in the hope you have set before us, so that we, and all your children shall be free, and the whole earth live to praise your name.'

Today we praise our risen Lord, who invites us into a living faith, to see our world with new eyes and reach out to people in the love and hope of Easter. Paul wrote: "as Christ was raised from the dead...we too might walk in newness of life". Easter morning is a beginning. It is all rock n' roll from now! If the worst happened, death, and God turned that around, it must be a new day, a day to show everyone we meet that we are part of the Easter experience. Apparently, as Martin Luther King lay dying in the arms of Andrew Young and Ralph Abernathy, Young cried out: "It's over! It's all over!" Abernathy shouted back at him, "Don't say that! It's never over! It will never be over!" Being part of God's Easter experience means that it is never over until we meet Jesus face to face and then the good things He is doing in us and through us will be made complete.

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