People of Hope
*John 20.19-end*

A sermon for the ecumenical service, October 21 2011

By the Right Reverend Professor N. T. Wright, University of St Andrews

Once you get the resurrection straight, everything else eventually falls into place. This point was brought home forcefully to me last year when I was in a cab, stuck in a traffic jam in London. The taxi driver, seeing from my clothes that I was a bishop, commented on what a difficult time we Anglicans were having over the issue of women bishops. I agreed. We were indeed having a difficult time. Then came the moment I will never forget. Turning round to face me – we were, as I say, stationary in the traffic – he 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?' It was a great gospel moment, and I have almost literally dined out on it ever since.

That message is at the heart of what I want to explore with you this evening, with gratitude for the privilege of being part of this great gathering, which is itself I believe and trust a sign of hope in this land and to us across the sea. The twentieth chapter of John's gospel is one of the most extraordinary and evocative parts of that already extraordinary and evocative book. When I was Bishop of Durham I regularly had to interview candidates for parish jobs; and I often used to ask them the Desert Island Disks question, as to which two chapters of the Bible they would take with them to a desert island. But, just as with the radio programme they say you've already got the Bible and Shakespeare, so I used to say, 'all right – you've already got Romans 8 and John 20'. Those two chapters, in very different style and mode, contain so much gospel, rich, dense, pressed down and running over that I sometimes think I could just read them and nothing else for ever.

Right at the start of tonight's passage comes the note which tells us what it's all about – though it would be easy to miss because of the drama that's going on. It was, says John, the evening of that day, the first day of the week. That phrase, 'the first day of the week', was the phrase with which chapter 20 began; when John repeats himself like this, something important is going on. His whole gospel is framed with echoes of Genesis 1, starting as it does with 'in

the beginning'. Now, he says, the old week is over. On the sixth day, the Friday, God created humankind in his own image, and on the Friday in John's story Pontius Pilate brings Jesus out to the crowds and says, 'Behold the man!' And by the evening of Friday Jesus has declared what God declared at the end of Genesis 1: it is finished. It's done. As the Father finished the work of creation, so the Son has finished the work of redemption. Then, on the seventh day, the Saturday, God rests – God incarnate rests in the tomb, his work complete. Then – then! – 'On the first day of the week, very early, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb . . . ' and found it, of course, empty; because *this is the first day of God's new world, God's new creation*. You see, it's been all too easy for preachers and theologians to imagine, within our late modern culture, that the point of the Easter stories is to provide a sort of happy ending after the sorrow of the previous week, or to assure us that there is a life after death, or something like that. But what John is saying is far more powerful, and (dare I suggest) far more relevant to our church life and witness today and tomorrow. He is insisting that Easter is the beginning of God's new creation, and that we therefore have a job to do. The completed work of the Father in creation, and the completed work of the Son in redemption, will issue directly in the ongoing work of the Spirit in mission. That is what verses 19 and onwards are all about.

The scene begins, after that powerful opening, with the disciples hiding behind locked doors because they are afraid that the Judaean authorities who arrested Jesus and handed him over to be killed will come for them as well. But *there are no locked doors in the kingdom of God*. Jesus came and stood in the middle of them. 'Peace be with you,' he said, and he showed them his hands and his side. And if you were setting this to music you would want at that point a moment of great awe and drama, because not only do the wounds in Jesus' hands and side indicate that it really is him, risen bodily from the dead; they are the signs, the marks of love, the ready evidence that having loved his own who were in the world he had loved them to the end, had given himself utterly for them, for us, for you and me.

Perhaps this is why the resurrection of Jesus is so hard for us to believe, as it was always hard, and not just hard, actually, but impossible. We all know that death is irreversible; people in the ancient world knew that just as much as we do. But that's because our world is bounded by the old creation, and Easter is the beginning of God's new creation. In the same way, we all find it hard to believe that we have been loved utterly and completely by the God who made the world. We know the frailty and fickleness of human love and we find it hard, even impossible, to imagine a love that will go all the way, that will last

the course. The two go together: the Easter message is the message of that unutterable, inexhaustible love. And that is why, of course, the faith that believes the resurrection is, in the last analysis, the same thing as the love that opens up like a flower to answer Jesus' love with a trembling love of its own. Ludwig Wittgenstein, remarkably, declared that 'it is love that believes the resurrection'. He was right. To say, as John does, that the disciples were overjoyed is putting it mildly. 'Who would have thought,' says George Herbert, 'my shrivelled heart Could have recovered greenness? It was gone Quite underground . . .' But he who dwelt underground on that cold Sabbath has come forth once more, and with him God's powerful love is revealed in all its glory, bringing our hearts out of their own winter into the fresh spring of Easter.

And that is where we start; where we all must start, young or old, lay or ordained, in whatever tradition we stand. 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.' And then, with another echo of Genesis, he breathes on them and says 'Receive the holy spirit.' And in those two sentences the whole mission of the church is contained. 'As . . . So.' We think back in a flash through all that has gone before in the gospel story. Jesus comes into Galilee announcing God's kingdom, healing the sick and celebrating the good news with the most unlikely people. He challenges God's people to be truly God's people, the light of the world, now that he's there to show them the way. He speaks of the coming victory which he will win through the strangest means, through his own death. He hints at the new temple which is to be built, a new temple consisting not of bricks and mortar but of himself and his followers. He does all this and much, much more. And now he scoops all of that up into one phrase, 'as the father sent me'; and turns it round into the great commission: 'so I'm sending you.' The mission of the church is not to drag people into buildings or to run raffles or issue statements. Oh, I know, buildings and money and statements matter in their place. But the mission of the church is *to be for the world what Jesus was for Israel* – a mission which will send us back to the four gospels again and again not only to be amazed and the power and love of God but to draw down that power and love, through prayer and the holy spirit, so that we can be Jesus-people for the world, kingdom-people for the world, forgiveness-people for the world. There are no locked doors in the kingdom of God, and we who

are charged to go into the world with the good news must pray them open so that the message of God's unconquerable love can get in.

'If you forgive anyone's sins,' says Jesus,, 'they are forgiven. If you retain anyone's sins, they are retained.' A solemn and difficult text; we might have preferred just the first half, not the second. And yet, as always in the gospel, forgiveness is never reduced to cheap grace, to God shrugging his shoulders and saying 'Oh well, that's all right, then.' Precisely because forgiveness is forgiveness and not mere tolerance, it must go with an implacable refusal to collude with sin, with violence or prejudice or spite, with pride or greed or lust, with any of the things that deface and corrupt God's good and beautiful creation. Precisely because Easter is about *new creation*, nothing that distorts or dismantles God's creation can come there. Love demands the very best for the beloved. As a parent will not rest until the last traces of the illness have been removed from the child, so God will not tolerate the disease of sin within his new creation. So the message of forgiveness is that all of that can be left behind, everything that we know we have done to contribute to the defacing of God's world; it can be left behind at the cross where Jesus finished, as he announced, the work of redemption. Easter says, 'Welcome to God's new world', and with that we are invited to taste that forgiveness for ourselves and to hold it out to the world as the great Jubilee message, the message of hope at last.

And of course people find this, as well, difficult if not impossible to believe. The story of Thomas, my beloved namesake, says it all. We live in a world of Thomases, of people who want evidence, people who don't want to be taken in, people who've been hurt before and resist what they see as a cheap and easy consolation. We live in a world where many who grew up in our churches feel horribly let down, either because the people they knew there weren't living what they professed, or because, worse, some of them used their position as a cloak for greed or lust or bullying, or just because the churches seemed to be living in a stale, dusty world of shrunken, sad and shrivelled humanness when they were discovering the beauty and glory of life and literature and love and laughter. And so, like Thomas, they hear what sounds like an old fantasy-message: oh yes, it's all right really, he's alive, come back to church like you used to . . . And they fold their arms and say, No, I'm not going to be taken in again, I'm not going back into that stifling little world where I felt cramped and constrained. Anyway, if I allow myself to hope like that I'll only be disappointed and hurt again. There are many like that on the edges of our churches and beyond. They want something more solid to go on.

And Jesus doesn't deny Thomas what he asks for. You want evidence? Very well, here it is: here are the wounds which love has borne, here are the marks of what it cost to complete the work, to finish the world's redemption. And, you see, the evidence is not just intellectual evidence, though if that's what's wanted that is there too, in plenty. The evidence is the evidence of a living Jesus, a loving Jesus, a Jesus who has done everything Thomas needed. 'Bring your finger here,' he says, 'and inspect my hands. Bring your hand here and put it into my side. Don't be faithless! Just believe!' And the question for us tonight, as we learn again and again the lessons of hope for ourselves, is the question of *how we can be for the world what Jesus was for Thomas*: how we can show to the world the signs of love, how we can reach out our hands in love, wounded though they will be if the love has been true, how we can invite those whose hearts have grown shrunken and shrivelled with sorrow and disbelief to come and see what love has done, what love is doing, in our communities, in our neighbourhoods, the works of justice and beauty which speak of God's new creation, the works of healing and new life which should abound in our hospices and remand centres, our schools and our countryside. It is when the church is out there making all that happen, not waiting for permission or encouragement but simply doing what Christian people from the very beginning have always done, that suddenly resurrection makes sense, because suddenly the idea of God's love in new creation makes sense, and the people who were formerly sceptical will find their hearts and minds transformed so that they say, with Thomas, 'My Lord and my God'. Yes, it might have been better if they had believed without seeing. But Jesus isn't fussy. Jesus will meet Thomas half way, because the new life of the Easter gospel is always going out to meet people half way, to surprise them once again with the overflowing and powerful love of God. And our task, in the power of the Spirit, is always to be meeting the world half way with the surprising signs of God's generosity. And those signs will be all the more powerful if we are doing them together.

One great project in which we worked together like that happened a few years ago in the north-east where for a week thousands of young people came together to be taught the scriptures in the morning, to work on social projects in the afternoon, and to hold celebratory and evangelistic rallies in the evening. (In fact, on the first evening I had the joy of introducing the Roman Catholic bishop to the leader of the local newer free churches; and I suddenly thought, Maybe this is what Anglicans are here for, to introduce these two to one another.) Among my favourite memories of the week was going with one

of the dozens of afternoon groups, who were painting the back walls of a lane of dark and dismal houses in the wrong part of one of our old towns, and hanging flower baskets all the way down the road. People were coming out of their houses – and that's something they didn't normally do, because they were afraid of their own dark back alley because of what used to go on there – and asking nervously whether we were from the council or whether they were going to have to pay. No, replied the cheerful teenagers, we're from the church; this is just a present to you. They were, of course, astonished. And the story doesn't stop there, because when I went back a year later the residents had begun to do more things in that back alley, planting little gardens and holding barbecues and getting to know one another. One small gesture of love and generosity from the church cascaded into new life and new possibilities for a whole street. And when the lay church worker who had gone to live on that street spoke about Jesus, they knew it was true. They had seen the marks.

Now the story of Thomas, the focal point of tonight's reading, is one of three astonishing personal encounters with the risen Jesus which John records. I want, in closing, just to say something briefly about the other two, because both of them are I think directly relevant to where we are as a church in these islands, and perhaps especially where you are here.

First there is the story of Mary Magdalene. She is the one who is first at the tomb, first to run and tell the others, first to weep in despair, first to see the angels, and above all first to see Jesus. I have sometimes wondered, reading Mary's story in John 20, whether part of the point is that those who see angels are likely to do so only through tears. Certainly it is often only when people are at that point that the risen Jesus comes to them and surprises them with his presence and love. And then something truly remarkable happens. Up to this point (though, granted, some manuscripts vary) John has referred to Mary by the Greek form of her name, *Maria*. That's the name by which she would have been known on the street. That's what the soldiers at the foot of the cross would have called her. But when she comes to Jesus, not even knowing that it is Jesus, and pours out her grief before him, he addresses her with her real name, her ancient biblical name, the Aramaic or Hebrew form, *Mariam*, 'Miriam': his mother's name, the name her Dad used to call her when she was little, the name which says, Miriam, it's going to be all right, I'm alive, and you are now my messenger. And Miriam, in an explosive and revolutionary moment, is the first person to tell anyone else that Jesus is alive, the message which is at the heart of all Christian ministry. She is the apostle to the apostles.

Miriam's story is powerful enough, and there may be some here tonight who resonate with it at particular and personal levels. But of course the other story is that of Peter, in John 21. Peter, as we know, has let Jesus down badly. Three times he has denied even knowing him, there beside the charcoal fire in the High Priest's courtyard. Now there is another charcoal fire burning by the sea, with the smell no doubt reminding Peter, as John's reference to it reminds us, of that horrible night not long before. And Jesus takes Peter apart from the others, and asks him the question, the key question, the question of Easter: Simon, son of John, do you love me?

Now Peter's answer, in the Greek, uses a different word, and I cannot believe that this is accidental. He doesn't use the same word, *agape*, the word which comes to carry the full meaning of God's love. He uses the word *phileo*, a good word but further down the scale. 'Yes, Master,' he says, 'You know I'm your friend.' That's as far as he can get. How can he say, after all that's happened, that he loves Jesus with the love he knows Jesus has shown for him? But he won't deny again, and when Jesus asks the same question a second time he gives the same answer. 'Yes, Master; you know I'm your friend.'

I suspect this resonates strongly with many of us here tonight. Many of us know perfectly well that we've let the Master down badly. We have made a hash of our discipleship; we have dropped the ball, we've looked the wrong way, we've got cold feet and denied what we know we believe. And we are ashamed. And yet here we are, hanging in there, because we'd rather be near Jesus, even though we feel uncomfortable, than hiding away. 'Yes, Master; you know I'm your friend.' And Jesus' response is astonishing: 'Feed my lambs,' he says. 'Look after my sheep.' He doesn't say, 'Well, Peter, you've really messed up; the only way forward now is a six-month penitential rehabilitation course and then we'll think about it.' The word of forgiveness comes in the form of a fresh commission. That is the sign of Jesus' own love. And this, remember, is Peter. All Petrine ministry begins at this point, with the free forgiveness of those who have failed.

But then comes the third question. This time Jesus uses the word Peter had used. 'Simon, son of John,' he says, 'are you my friend?' Peter was upset, says John, that on this third time Jesus said it like that, and he replied eagerly. But I think the point is this – and it's a point which I suspect many of us need, in our varied discipleship and service. This is, for me, the heart of the Easter message as applied to those who would seek to be Jesus' friends, to follow him and serve him. 'Very well,' Jesus is saying. 'If that's where you are, that's where

we'll start.' As with Mary and her tears, as with Thomas and his scepticism, Jesus comes half way to meet Peter. He doesn't insist on Peter being able to say the big L word right off. That will come. Peter is hanging in there; Yes, Master, you know I'm your friend. All right, Peter; that's where we'll begin. Feed my sheep. And, by the way, things are going to be tough; other people will have other tasks to do; but you must simply remember this. 'Follow me!'

It is love that believes the resurrection. It is, conversely, the resurrection of Jesus that awakens love – love for him, love for one another, love for God's world. This is the message of Easter. This is the message of hope. This is the message for, and through, the whole church, through all of us together. This is the message of Jesus. May it be so for us, in us and not least through us. Now and always. Amen.