

**8 April 2018**  
**John 20.19-31**

Let me tell you a story of symbol and trust ... of grief and hope ...of new life..a story I told you this time last year..it's about butterflies and much more..

Butterflies have been an important symbol for me for a long time. After a retreat in Lyneham many years ago I bought myself a butterfly ring and necklace as a symbol of new life, of finally leaving home. I also bought my parents a beautiful pottery bowl with hints of pink butterflies – to say thanks for their care.

A short time later I chose the butterfly, a symbol of resurrection, for my white ordination stole. It is a Ulysses butterfly – the wanderer, or pilgrim – a symbol with layers of meaning.

The life cycle of the butterfly as we have heard is a metaphor for the story of Easter. The caterpillar seems to die, dissolve, then eventually re-emerge from the chrysalis, with wrinkled wet wings which dry in the sun and a beautiful butterfly is born – a miracle of new life.

At midnight on Christmas Eve in the year 2000, I was preaching in the dark quiet to a packed congregation at St James' Church, King Street in the centre of Sydney.

I was in the middle of my sermon when a huge butterfly flew above our heads. I was mesmerised, and so was the congregation. I stopped my sermon and watched, then said, 'I thought butterflies were an Easter symbol, not Christmas!' then went on with my sermon.

The next Sunday I spoke of butterflies in my sermon. Little did I know that my future husband, Nikolai, who was sitting near the front of the church with his daughter Kate, had different thoughts. Exactly 12 months earlier, he had buried his beloved wife, Ellie. Shortly before her death he had bought her a beautiful white nightgown, not realising till after her death that it was decorated with the outline of butterflies.

On the day of Ellie's death, at Calvary Hospice in Sydney, Nikolai went outside onto the balcony trying to make sense of it all. A butterfly flew around Nikolai seeming to dance, then landed right next to his hand, on the balustrade, its wings pulsing. Then it did a figure of 8 dance as it left, and a boat that had been in the harbour

all week slowly moved out to sea. Nikolai understood; Ellie was okay, she was saying goodbye.

Exactly twelve months after her funeral, when he saw the butterfly at St James, again he was reassured, and felt he was home and need look no further – he had found a new partner and Ellie would give her blessing ...

So, on 6 January, two weeks later, the Feast of the Epiphany, Nikolai called me and asked me out ...

and the poignant resurrection, new life symbol continues ... My life and Nikolai's began again.

Sarah Bachelard reflects:

*In today's reading, on the evening of Easter day, Jesus has come to the gathered community despite the locked doors. He is no longer constrained by the limits of ordinary human life and he empowers the disciples to live likewise beyond the limits previously set by death, fear and sin.*

*The encounter with Thomas a week later, emphasises that the risen Jesus is indeed the crucified Jesus – no mere disembodied spirit, and also, for the first time, in the words attributed to Thomas, 'My Lord and my God!', Jesus is explicitly identified as God.<sup>1</sup> It is the climax of John's whole gospel. With these brief encounters and the ones we heard last week, the density and richness of the resurrection encounter, and its meaning for human life is conveyed.*

*But, what strikes me as I reflect on the gospel proclamation of resurrection is just how fragile, how vulnerable it is.*

*The resurrection and the disciples' witness to it is the foundation of Christian faith. And it reshapes, so our tradition claims, the whole foundation for human life. The old limit of human life – death – is revealed not to be ultimate. The ancient pattern of human violence and the sacrifice of the one for the many, is shown to have nothing to do with God, and no power to alter God's way of being towards us – which we see in the risen Christ to be limitlessly peaceable, limitlessly forgiving and hospitable. The resurrection means that we ourselves can learn to be this way – like Christ.*

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 1188

*We no longer have to source our identities defensively – afraid of death, afraid of shame, afraid of condemnation and the ‘powers of darkness’. Instead we can live boldly, freely and generously, upheld and immersed in the same boundless energy of love in which Jesus himself lived and moved and had his being.*

*Jesus has undergone all the fear and violence that distorts and deforms our world, in order to show us that they are not the last word and so to loosen their grip on us and how we live. We are invited to entrust ourselves to this revelation of the true nature of things, to ‘believe’ (as John puts it), and so to participate in what Paul rightly calls ‘a new creation’. This is indeed Good News!*

*But what actually happens? How does God communicate this truth, this new possibility for human life? How does God begin to make it known? Not with the risen Jesus turning up, unmistakably himself, to rebuke Caiaphas and Pilate and the others who condemned him; not with the eruption of mega-church rallies at the Colosseum or in Jerusalem, but on an almost absurdly, laughably small scale.*

*Its first intimation is the unexplained and mute emptiness of the tomb, one or two disciples peering in and seeing some discarded grave clothes.*

*There’s a woman beyond hope, weeping at the tomb, met by someone she barely recognises.*

*There’s a small and fearful group huddled behind closed doors, in whose midst Jesus suddenly appears, then disappears and then returns a week later – again without explanation or seeming strategy (no very efficient marketing here) – to speak directly to Thomas’s condition.*

*In the early preaching of the resurrection, recounted in the Acts of the Apostles, Peter acknowledges precisely this small-scale, intimate communication when he tells the Gentile Cornelius that God raised Jesus on the third day ‘and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead’ (Acts 10.41).*

*So what's going on here? What does this manner of communicating the resurrection show us about the Christian life, the kind of life we're being invited into?*

*For one thing, it seems consistent with the way God acts all along. The centre is made visible at the edges, in virtual obscurity and hiddenness. The people chosen to be a blessing to the world are a small Semitic tribe, criss-crossing the desert in search of home; the Son of God is born under a cloud, to an unlikely couple in an outpost of the Roman Empire;*

*and now, these first intimations of resurrection, of the re-foundation of the very basis of life, are given to a handful of frightened followers who have thus far proved themselves less than reliable in the task of transforming the world.*

*Talk about risk. And that's before we get involved! When God invites our participation in the very project of creation and redemption, it seems set up to be maximally vulnerable – ever at risk of collapsing altogether.*

*And all this suggests that there is something about who God is and what God is doing among us that is unable to be communicated by means that are too secure, safe, or certain.*

*There's a tenderness in divine life and so in the Christian life, a sense of exposure – which is missed by those muscular Easter hymns that speak so insistently of victory, triumph and overcoming.*

*Yes – resurrection transforms death and fear – but not in the sense of a triumphal army moving in with boots on to secure some kind of impregnable position. It's more like the dawn of a new freedom to be. Received as gift, never conquered, grasped or controlled as possession. It comes when we least expect it, in our emptiness, our nothingness; comes as an inexhaustible whisper – God's still, small voice, the gradual yet potent realisation of being called by name, of being given a voice, a life, a vocation.*

*Resurrection life – our life in the wake of Easter Day – does not guarantee security or impregnability, some kind of free pass from the pain and difficulties of life in the world. It's not about being assured of our righteousness and virtue, a self-possessed 'salvation'. But it does offer the possibility of being met in the midst of our doubt, confusion and grief by a presence which, for all its vulnerability is also radically transforming, and of becoming bearers*

*of this same fragile yet insistent life in the world – witnesses of the God who in the words of St Paul, ‘gives life to the dead and calls into existence things that do not exist’ (Rom. 4.17).<sup>2</sup>*

*Susanna*

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<sup>2</sup> [https://resources.holycovenant.org.au/docs/sermons/2014/Sermon\\_2014-04-27.pdf](https://resources.holycovenant.org.au/docs/sermons/2014/Sermon_2014-04-27.pdf)