

Easter Day 16 April 2017

[Acts 10: 34-43; Ps 118: 1-2,14-24; Colossians 3:1-4; Matthew 28: 1-10](#) Vanderbilt

[Easter A April 16 2017](#) Textweek

To understand the context of this Easter Day sermon, the sanctuary/altar was dominated by the nose cone of a formula 1 Lola racing car, including the wings (front aerofoils); it was placed pointing upwards and had the number 95 painted on it.



We arrive at Church on Easter morning and we look, perhaps with some expectation, at the altar and the sanctuary, and what do we find, what do we see?

Already some questions have emerged, what is it, what does it mean; some are a little disturbed wondering what has happened to the cross; and what is that all supposed to mean?

And it is those questions and that not knowing that takes us to the place of the first Easter Morning; in fact such questions can do more than that they can give us an appreciation of a 'first Easter Morning'.

The first Easter morning created quite a disturbance and the disciples and the early church sought to make sense of what they found, they sought to explain and appreciate the whole disturbing scene within the context of all they knew and with the words of their beloved teacher still echoing in their hearts.

One early Jewish sect seemed to be completely dismayed by the discovery of an empty tomb; and yet they adopted as a symbol the cross, they are still well known today and often wear crosses as a means of identification, many of us expected a cross here today, a sign, and a symbol that has somehow found its way into our very DNA.

It is hard to imagine that Londoners during the blitz, who lost friends and family to the endless bombing, would mark those deaths by wearing a symbolic bomb around their necks.

And yet that early cult established a symbol and an explanation that has been maintained for centuries; in fact it is so well established we rarely question it, although growing numbers of people are ignoring or forgetting it.

Why do they hang on to the cross? Are they, themselves still hanging on a cross? Perhaps they have seen more, and perhaps they wear it as a true sign that they too can cheat death; they do not hang on a cross, rather the instrument of death hangs on them.

The documented stories that followed that first Easter make it clear that they did also see an empty tomb, and I can imagine it was difficult for them to even begin to appreciate the reality of resurrection.

And it is that same degree of difficulty that we all share when confronted by a dramatic change to our 'known' worldview...

It was only about 300 years before the first Easter when Hellenistic astronomy established the spherical shape of the Earth as a physical given. That new paradigm was gradually adopted throughout the Old World during Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages. However it was not until 1519 that a practical demonstration of Earth's sphericity was achieved by Ferdinand Magellan and Juan Sebastián Elcano's expedition's circumnavigation.

New paradigms often take a long time to be fully appreciated and to become the new norm.

Anyway, rather than going on and on about that first Easter which gave rise to hot cross buns and chocolate eggs, and people wearing crosses, lets come back to our Easter morning and to all that we apprehend.

What is that thing, what is it that has displaced the cross?

I'm wondering what Church council might say on Monday when they discover that 'that thing' is about \$8000 of precision engineering, and has been constructed to standards and materials that are more usually associated with the aerospace industry.

It might seem extravagant but remember our DNA and consider how this work of religious art compares with some others.

Pope John Paul the First, once revealed in a public audience in 1978:

“. . . this morning, I flushed my toilet with a solid gold lever edged with diamonds and at this very moment, bishops and cardinals are using a bathroom on the second floor of the papal palace which trappings, I am told, would draw more than fifty million dollars at auction”.

So let's not be distracted by the cost associated with what has been revealed this Easter morning, and to set minds at ease we've only borrowed it so that we can like the early Gospel writers tell the story of our Easter morning.

So back to what we have seen.

It is the nose cone of Lola racing car, that's what we're apprehending as we seek to make sense of Easter; and like those first witnesses we too might ask what does it mean.

And once again our DNA kicks in and we are drawn to the text, what does the inscription mean; the first Easter witnesses somehow schooled in Latin had the initials **INRI** to decode (Latin: *Iēsūs/Iēsus Nazarēnus, Rex Iūdaeōrum*) and so wrote into their account the translation of the Latin inscription (in John 19:19) which in English reads as "Jesus the Nazarene, King of the Jews".

But all we have is ninety-one... and before lunchtime Matthew, Mark, Luke and John and other members of the St Paul's congregation have offered some textual analysis for us.

Those with a more protestant DNA have readily seen that 91 represents the ten commandments, but with one standing in front of the others, the great and first commandment offered by the beloved teacher.

The more enlightened scientific types have marvelled at the hidden perfection that the number can disclose; it is the smallest positive integer expressible as a sum of six distinct squares: $91 = 1^2 + 2^2 + 3^2 + 4^2 + 5^2 + 6^2$.

It is both a *triangular number* and a *hexagonal number*, one of the few such numbers to also be a centered hexagonal number

Rather than follow the mathematical thread, and seek to understand a new paradigm in a new language, we retreat somewhat to the familiar; we are called back by our DNA, just as those first witnesses were.

Good liturgical Anglicans will readily recall that in the Revised Common Lectionary (Year C) the psalm is appointed for the first Sunday in Lent, linking it to the

temptation of Christ, where the devil quotes this psalm; and will be somewhat pleased at the neat bookending from the first Sunday in Lent to the completion of Easter. How tempting it was for those witnessing the first Easter to also wrap it all up neatly with their DNA expectation of a Messiah.

Those with a longer liturgical memory might recall that in the medieval Western Church Psalm 91 was included in the readings for Good Friday.

And the Judeo branch of our Judeo-Christian DNA might draw our attention to the midrash Bamidbar Rabbah 12:3 which recounts the story of Moses' ascent to the Mount Sinai during which he was assaulted by a band of hostile angels wishing to prevent him from acquiring the Torah. According to the midrash, the patriarch defended himself by singing the words of Psalm 91

And Psalm 91 has become widely known as the Psalm of Protection; so perhaps this Easter morning of ours we are being shown a new paradigm that goes beyond insurance and pension plans and superannuation; we are being shown a path that offers protection, a path that we've never before considered.

Of course, some have a more contemporary expression of their religious DNA and they too offer an analysis; the Brazilian-American metal band Soulfly covered this psalm in Portuguese on the bonus track "Salmo-91" on their fifth album *Dark Ages*; are they asking that we consider 'Soul flying' as the rhythm that takes us out of the 'dark ages'?

In a similar vein Sinéad O'Connor's debut album *The Lion and the Cobra* includes a recitation of verses 11 to 13 of Psalm 91 in Irish by singer Enya on the song "Never Get Old".

It's alright for the young ones to speak of 'never get old', wait till they get old! Or maybe, there is something in that; for maybe there is a paradigm of life lived in an eternal frame of reference, now what was it the teacher said about the 'Third Day', and why did he even go to Jerusalem, if not to face death.

Some of that new age thinking also seemed to hint at an eternal nature that is reflected in the numerals; 9 numerically signifies completeness, finality, fullness; a trinity of trinity; and 1 represents the beginning, the singularity from which all derives...9 & 1 Alpha and Omega.

Like the early witnesses of the first Easter we can, and should explore more what we apprehend today.

There is no cross, and those who see the cross in the nose cone of the Lola are perhaps looking for the cross and only for the cross, just and some looked and only found the Messiah that they wanted to see.

I see a sign to move forward to be at the front and to get on with race; even my DNA reminded me of the baptismal charge, "to fight the good fight and finish the race".

The Lola runs on a track that few will ever travel on, and it has no speed limits, it is up to the driver to go as fast as they can.

The position of the nose cone points heavenward, and in that positions its wings seem to embrace.

And the text is stunning....

Yes we can settle for Psalm 91, that's a good call.

But if we have to look back to the Scriptures let's look at a later more profound theological appreciation...

The 91st verse of John's Gospel [John 3;15]

¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

And the final word from the book of Revelation; the 91st verse in the Book of Revelation [Revelation 5:9]

⁹ They sing a new song:

"You are worthy to take the scroll
and to open its seals,

for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God
saints from every tribe and language and people and nation;

This is our Easter morning

and we are those saints from every tribe and language and people and nation.

Peter Humphris