

Brancepeth sermon
5 April 2026
Easter morning

Acts 10.34-43

John 20.1-18

Psalm 118: 1-2, 14-24

May I speak in the name of God,

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,

Amen.

Early this morning, some of us gathered here at St Brandon's
for the Dawn Vigil.

That service starts outside the church door,
in the darkness, gathered around a brazier
in which a fire is burning.

After some initial prayers,
the Paschal candle – our special Easter candle

is supposed to be lit from that fire, from the fire in the brazier,
and so Martin takes a piece of wood, lights it in the flames,
and uses that to light the candle.

Or, at least, that's the idea.

But I don't know if you noticed anything
about the weather this morning.

You see, there was just a little bit of wind.

The wind didn't blow out the fire in the brazier;

in fact, it fed it with oxygen -

that fire was burning fiercely, with a really intense heat,

and, every now and then, showers of sparks flying out;

I worried that the clergy standing beside it in their robes,
might be a little vulnerable.

But trying to get the flame from the brazier to the candle -
well, that was a challenge.

Geoff stood inside the porch with the candle,

to give it some shelter;

and so Martin had to get the flame

across some seven or eight feet of exposed territory,

without it blowing out.

And even with some carefully manoeuvred cardboard
serving as a windbreak,
that proved to be well-nigh impossible.

Martin made attempt after attempt,
but the flame blew out each time,
sometimes immediately,
sometimes just before the candle caught light.

And each time, the congregation standing there in the cold
watched its progress with eager anticipation,
and groaned when the flame guttered and died.

Until eventually, after several attempts,
and much to the relief of everyone
who was still standing there in the cold, fingers numb,
the candle's wick caught light, the flame rose and steadied,
and Geoff was at last able to hold the candle high and call out
'The Light of Christ!',
to which we all replied, 'Thanks be to God!'

That service then moves into the body of the darkened church,
and *everyone* is given a candle.

Some people's candles are lit directly from the Paschal candle.

Some are lit from their neighbour's candle.

But flame slowly spreads throughout the church,

from candle to candle,

until the whole place is illuminated.

From the brazier, to the paschal candle, to each of our own candles,

the flame spreads until the whole building fills with light.

Now something similar happens in our gospel reading today.

When the story starts,

Mary Magdalene is standing in the cold and dark,

and it is still very much night for her –

not just literally, though the story does begin before dawn,

but metaphorically too, because all the light has gone from her life.

The man she has been following,

the man who has given meaning to her life,

the man who has been her guide and her friend,

is dead, and buried, and gone.

For her, the light of life has gone out.

But then she hears her name, 'Mary!',
spoken by the man she thought was the gardener,
and she looks at him again,
and realises that the Son has risen,
that her friend has returned to her,
her life has returned to her,
joy has returned to her.
And her heart catches light,
like a candle-flame in the darkness.
From the light of Jesus, who is standing before her,
from the light of his resurrection, from the light of his life,
her heart takes flame.
And that's not where it stops.
Jesus says to her, 'go to my brothers and tell *them*'.
And so Mary carries her flame
through the brightening morning,
and takes it to the other disciples,
to Jesus' other scattered, disheartened followers,
to their extinguished, darkened hearts.

She takes the flame that Jesus has lit in her heart,
and she spreads it.

Of course, if we carried on reading,
we'd see that it's not *quite* that simple;
the other disciples' hearts don't catch light very easily;
the wind of their doubts, of their despair,
and frankly, the wind of their distrust of a woman's testimony,
keep on blowing out the flame that she tries to pass to them –
but eventually, their candles catch light too,
their hearts are set aflame,
their joy returns –
and *they* become bearers of the light of Christ too.

We heard in our reading from Acts, Peter preaching to a crowd,
telling them how God had raised Jesus from the dead.

Peter was, in doing that,
spreading the flame that was burning in his heart.

He was touching the candle that he was holding
to the candles of his neighbours,
and seeing the light spread.

And it continued to spread.

The reason we are here this morning, gathered in this church,
celebrating Easter,
is because that light has continued to spread,
candle to candle,
flame to flame,
light to light,
spreading around the world,
spreading down the centuries,
all lit from that one, central flame.

The flame that set light to Mary's candle in the dark of the garden,
on that first Easter morning,
has now spread to include even us, here today;
it's the same light;
it's the same flame;
it is the same fire of Christ burning here that burnt for Mary
two thousand years ago.

But what is it, this light?

In the darkness this morning, at our Dawn Vigil,
the Paschal candle was lit from the brazier,
from the fire that had been burning all along,
the blaze, the conflagration, that had been burning all along.

And what happened to Jesus at the first Easter
was not just a story of a man coming back to life,
a miraculous resurrection, a reversal of his one death,

It was a story of the light and life of God,
the light of the One who had said, in the beginning,
‘Let there be light!’;

the life of the One who, always and everywhere,
breathes life into all living things,

the light and the life of the One in whom
all things live and move and have their being –

that light and life, the light and life of God,

lifted Jesus up,

overcame Jesus’ death,

filled Jesus to the brim,

and poured out from him to others.

And the light that we share today
is that same light:
it is the light and life of God
poured out upon us; catching us up; lifting us high.
On Easter Day, we are not simply
celebrating one man's resurrection –
though we are certainly doing that.
We are celebrating the pouring out of God's light and life,
in and through that one man,
in and through Jesus,
but poured out for all of us,
poured out so that we might all know
that we are illuminated by a light stronger than night,
that we are held by a life stronger than death,
that we are embraced by a love that will never let us go,
and so that we might know
that we are to be bearers of that light,
bearers of that life, bearers of that love,
taking it out into the world around us.

So, this morning, this Easter morning,
when you leave this building to carry on with your Easter weekend,
think of yourself as a candle-bearer;
as someone who has been given a flame to carry,
a flame that was lit from the light of Christ's resurrection,
a flame that burns with the light and life and love of God,
a flame that has been passed down from person to person,
community to community,
context to context,
until it reaches you here, today.

Think of yourself as a candle-bearer,
who has the opportunity to take that light and spread it further:
the light of a love that is stronger than death.

And although you are carrying that flame
out into a windy world,
this is *not* a flame that the wind can extinguish,
it is *not* a flame that is going to gutter and die;
because nothing can extinguish *this* flame.

As the Apostle Paul put it,

in his letter to the young church in Rome:

³¹What then are we to say about these things?

If God is for us, who is against us?...

³⁴ It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised,
who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us.

³⁵Who will separate us from the love of Christ?

Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine,
or nakedness, or peril, or sword?...

³⁷No, in all these things we are more than conquerors
through him who loved us.

³⁸For I am convinced that neither death, nor life,
nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come,
nor powers, ³⁹nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation,
will be able to separate us from the love of God
in Christ Jesus our Lord.

And so that is why, when I say, 'Christ is risen!',
you say, 'He is risen indeed. Allelulia!'