

God Has a Plan for Us

Have you ever ridden on a roller coaster? Was it fun or was it scary? I have been on one in all my life; it was many years ago. And it terrified me.

Strapped into a seat in an open car by a rigid body harness, the car goes up and down, while it twists and turns. There are pauses at the top of climb ... and then great speeds as it hurtles down. I screamed in total panic; at the end the attendant unlocked my harness, and I could barely walk as I staggered away from the ride. It is not my thing, and I will not be taking another ride on a roller-coaster. Perhaps you enjoy them.

Life can be a roller-coaster ride with all the ups and downs, the twists and turns. I hope and pray that life's ups and downs are never as terrifying for you as that ride was for me.

It has been a rollercoaster week for Jesus, but he does not seem to be fazed by all that has gone on, by the ups and downs, the twists and turns.

The week started with people cheering Jesus as he rides triumphantly into Jerusalem. The people laid palm branches and cloaks down on the dusty roadway, and cheered Jesus with shouts of Hosannahs.

Anyone else would likely have climbed off the colt and taken up the faux crown that the world was offering him. But Jesus stayed the course, he was not swayed by the crowds, he knew that the true crown came from God, not the adoring crowds.

Later in the week, when the way became tough and the outlook looked bleak to his followers, Jesus remained true. He was not swayed by the crowd, and he was not swayed by the darkness of the world. Jesus knew God's plan and remained obedient to it.

But this is not how Jesus' life started, or what life was like before this last week. In the reading from the Acts of the Apostles, Peter is speaking to the household of Cornelius the centurion. Peter tells Cornelius:

“how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.” (v38)

Peter and the disciples had been witnesses to all those things that Jesus did in Judea and in Jerusalem.

They were also witnesses to what happened this week. Which ended, as Peter tells Cornelius, “They put him to death by hanging him on a tree.” (v39)

“But God raised him on the third day.” (v40)
God raised him on the third day.

Mary is the first to find out when she goes to the tomb on the third day, so early in the morning that it is still dark. The huge stone across the entrance of the tomb has been moved aside.

Mary had witnessed those healings and heard those teachings that Peter spoke about. Mary has also been on this rollercoaster ride, from the triumphal entry to Jesus' death on the cross and being laid in the tomb. Now it looks like the ride is about to hurtle further down.

Until, ... standing outside the tomb, weeping, she sees Jesus, risen from the dead. Although she does not recognize him until he calls her by name. This ride has taken an unexpected turn and life is looking up.

Jesus' rollercoaster week has reached a new high. Unsurprised by all that has taken place, Jesus tells Mary that he is ascending to his father and our father, to his God and our God.

Certainly, none of us are Jesus, but we can strive to be like him, to follow his example, to stay the course and to keep our eyes on the things of God.

No matter how many, or how few friends are cheering us on in this hour, or what struggles we might face, we can always be assured that God has a plan for us, as God had a plan for Jesus.

Part of that plan, as Peter tells Cornelius, is:

to testify that Jesus is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. And that everyone, everyone, who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

Aside from Jesus, everyone else in the Easter story falls short; they do not manage to keep their eyes on God all the time. Judas betrays Christ. The disciples closest to Jesus fall asleep on prayer watch. Peter denies him. The disciples flee and scatter in fear. The stories in the Bible do not pull punches when it describes all these failures, but truly the point is not to depress us.

The point is to impress on us the fact that everyone falls short. To remind us that we cannot stay the course with God's plan for us alone. That is why God sent Jesus in the first place.

No matter one's age, wisdom or background — whether a child or a learned senior — we will all fall short of the glory of God. But the Easter story reminds us that we are not called to be perfect. We are called to follow Jesus.

So, hold on tight! Life's rollercoaster may crawl up and hurtle down, it may feel like a pause when we want action, it may turn in a direction that surprises us or makes us fearful.

But, be assured. Jesus has been here already, and the Holy Spirit is along for the ride. There is a plan and all we have to do is follow Jesus.

For the Lord is risen. The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia! Alleluia!

Readings: John 20:1-18
Acts 10:34-43