

**Easter Sunday, 16 April 2017**

**St Andrew's, Cobham**

**Acts 10.34-43; Colossians 3.1-4; John 20.1-18.**

**The Winning Team**

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Whew. Easter Sunday.

As usual, Easter has been intense. First Ash Wednesday, then self-denial for 40 days during Lent, then Holy Week, starting with our Palm Sunday procession and passion narrative, and then a series of events and services including Stations of the Cross, a service of healing, Maundy Thursday footwashing, our excellent Kids' Easter Club, and onwards to the solemnity of our Good Friday vigil, our outstanding Good Friday concert, and then yesterday the wonderful Easter High Tea.

And finally, we arrive at today, Easter Sunday.

I've been trying to come up with an image that captures all this intensity and somehow shows what this progression to Easter Sunday means for us.

And I thought that perhaps it could be likened to a big sports match.

Think back to the last really big match you watched. I'm not much of a sports follower, so for me, it was in 1995 when the Springboks beat the All Blacks in the Rugby World Cup Final. Now that was intense. Even I was hooked. It is quite possible that I even had a flag painted on my face, but in my defence, I was young. That moment when Joel Stransky put the winning kick through the posts in the dying moments of extra time was fantastic. I wasn't a Christian at the time but I found myself bargaining with God: 'God,' I said, 'if this goes through I promise I will go to church tomorrow.' Well, through it went, so the next day while everyone was nursing their hangovers, off I went to church. So it's really all thanks to me that the Springboks won.

But perhaps football's your game. I was going to talk about the last time that England was in the finals of the Fifa World Cup, but I am reliably informed that there is probably no-one in the congregation who can remember that.

So I will stick to the rugby metaphor for now.

Try to think of the Easter Story as a vitally important final in the greatest showdown of all time between the two great teams in the league – let's call

them the Forces of Darkness and the Forces of Light. The build-up has taken some time – many centuries, in fact. There have been many warm-ups and knock-out matches between the two sides, and by the time the Easter Story begins, things are not looking good for the Forces of Light. It's been a long time since they had any star players. The Jerusalem branch of Ladbroke's are offering very long odds on the Forces of Light ever winning again. The Forces of Light fan base has dwindled to almost nothing.

But then rumours start to fly that there is a new star player on the Forces of Light, and a match is going to be scheduled. Could this be the final of all finals? No-one is sure. But the fans start to regroup. They start following the star player around the countryside – suddenly everyone wants a piece of him, to get in on the action. They are astounded by his skill, and by the new match tactics he keeps talking about. Could this be it?

As the noise starts to grow, the Forces of Dark are immediately put on their guard and start planning for a match. They will stop at nothing. They send their spies to infiltrate the other side's training camp, to check out his tactics and to undermine them. They meet together in secret to compare notes and plan their attack. They even manage to get one of the players on the Forces of Light team – a player called Judas – to spy for them and betray his team's movements.

The pressure builds and builds, and suddenly, it's all on. The whistle goes and the ball is in play.

The action starts in Gethsemane Stadium, and the Forces of Dark strike first. Led by Judas, who is now openly on the other team, they launch their attack on the star player, with a massive tackle that seemingly has him completely immobilized. The Forces of Light team want to launch a counter-offensive but the star player shouts out to them to stop. 'Don't fight back!' he says. Was this one of the strange new tactics the star player had been on about? His team mates couldn't tell. Not knowing what to do, forgetting all they had talked about in their strategy meetings, they panic and desert the field, leaving the star player alone there. The vice-captain, Peter, even denies knowing him.

The action moves swiftly to another arena, Jerusalem Park, and now the Forces of Dark have not only immobilized the star player but they have started to pummel him in the scrum, not even caring if their blows can be seen. Their game plan is to kill him and now they appeal to the referee, Pontius Pilate, to call an infringement and grant them the penalty that will give them what they want. Pilate can't see any infringement, but now the fans have all defected and every voice in the park is screaming for a penalty. He gives in and grants it.

Now the action spills over into the last stadium, Golgotha Stadium, and there the penalty is taken. It is brutal. The star player appears to disappear under the mass of bodies in the Forces of Dark who do to him what they want. After a struggle of three hours, the Forces of Dark step back to reveal the dead, broken body of the star player. They claim victory and go home.

Meanwhile, the Forces of Light team members are utterly demoralized. All their hopes for the future have been shattered. In fear, they hide in their homes. But one of the team's support staff, Mary of Magdala, who has helped to keep the team fed and clothed, has the courage to venture out before dawn on the third day, to take care of the star player's body. She is appalled to find that it has gone! She races back to find Peter who, despite his defection, still holds his place as vice-captain, and then she runs on to John's house. They race to the tomb and they confirm her news. What on earth could have happened? The men return home again. Mary alone is left grieving and wondering and then suddenly, there he is, the star player, calling her gently by her name. The star player, killed by the Forces of Dark, is not dead after all! In an amazing turn of events, it starts to look like the Forces of Dark have not won after all. The star player turns out to be not just the star player, but the ultimate star player.

The Forces of Light team immediately launch an appeal to the TMO, the Television Match Officials. As they review the footage, with the risen star player there to make things clear, they see something astonishing.

It turns out that in all the confusion, the final action in Golgotha Stadium had in fact taken place on the Forces of Light's very own try line and, what's more, the star player had done something astonishing. He had somehow hidden the ball on his body. While the Forces of Dark team thought they were overwhelming him with their kicks and punches and crosses, he was quietly placing the ball on the try line and scoring a victory for the Forces of Light. It turns out that all along he knew what he was doing – the new tactics had triumphed.

Centuries of match commentary will follow, with commentators trying to work out exactly how the star player pulled it off. Many will dispute the TMO footage, but the simple, indisputable fact remains – the star player who was killed has risen and still lives. This is the absolute evidence that the Forces of Light had in fact triumphed in the match.

Death itself had been defeated.

So what happens next?

Well, friends, every great sporting triumph deserves a victory parade, and today is ours. Easter Sunday is our victory parade, and we must celebrate it with all our hearts, with other supporters all around the world.

But there is so much more.

The Forces of Light fan club is open to new members, even those who were once keen supporters of the Forces of Dark. No-one is excluded. There are amazing special offers to anyone who signs up. An offer of eternal life when this one ends. And in this life, an offer of forgiveness, peace, joy, healing and unspeakable comfort.

And people are signing up in their droves! Despite gloomy reports in the press about the problems of the fan club, all around the world it is gaining massive new membership.

Yes, there have been many more matches with the Forces of Dark since then, and there will be many more to come. But these are the desperate, last-gasp attempts by those forces to avoid their inevitable, final and total relegation to oblivion. They know that as a team they are finished. As members of the fan club, we will have to keep fighting these battles until the final whistle. In fact, our membership of the fan club means that we won't be able just to shout from the side-lines but will have to become part of the team and get on the pitch.

But now, here, today, is our victory celebration.

The alter, which was stripped on Good Friday, has been restored to its glory. The church is full of flowers put there by our wonderful flower ladies. There is chocolate everywhere.

Today, there is only one thing to do. Rejoice!

Amen.