

## **Sermon for Easter Day at St Mungo's, West Linton, 2022,**

based on the gospel reading from John 20 v1-18

I suspect that the hopes that set Mary Magdalene's pulse racing on that very first Easter morning were not the same as ours as we gather here this Easter morning. Some will already have exchanged 'Happy Easter' greetings, expressing desires that hearts will be lifted by celebrating the day that Jesus opened a gateway to eternal life through which all who believe can pass, whatever their past mistakes. Our greetings are as sweet-sounding as the mini-Easter eggs, scattered around for the children to find this morning, are sweet tasting. However, none of our hopes are likely to have crossed Mary's mind on that 1<sup>st</sup> Easter morning. They are later constructs of the church: this is not to say they are not solid, trustworthy hopes, just that their fulfillment may take us by surprise! So let's look more closely at what Mary did and what happened to her on that morning because its importance cannot be underestimated; had she not gone to the tomb, we might not be here this morning.

Why was she minded to go to the tomb and why did she react in the way she did to what she found? Some license to elaborate on John's account is in order because her role- pivotal as it is- will probably have been down-graded by the male dominance that pervaded all aspects of life at the time. That Mary is there in the first place, alone and in the dark, is a mark of courage and compassion. Other accounts give her female companions and a purpose, the sort of things that undertakers do. But by Jewish law she had no right to be there and certainly no right, later, to offer to take Jesus' body off her 'gardeners' hands: these were the preserves of close family only. Some have speculated that this must mean that Jesus and Mary were unofficially married but neither Mary nor Jesus had worried too much about conventions before. Rather it speaks of a unique understanding between the two of them, of the prominence of Mary among the disciples as a leader and the trust that others had in her.

Perhaps Jesus' mother, Mary, had said 'I can't face this', at the prospect of completing the funereal rites: and Mary Magdalene stepped in, saying, 'Don't worry, I'll go'! Going alone in the dark and finding that someone had apparently got there first, she ran to tell other disciples. But how did she know where to find them? The last we heard, the disciples were said to have scattered to the four winds. Postcodes and GPS hadn't been invented. Could Mary have been holding the fort, keeping the group together by sheltering them in her own home? In that case, like Mary and her little lamb in the nursery rhyme, she would know exactly where to find them!

The two disciples ventured inside the tomb and found that Jesus' body had vanished but were they merely confirming what Mary had previously seen?

That someone brave enough to go to the tomb alone in pitch darkness, find it disturbed and not go inside seems unlikely. John may have edited out Mary's precedence, feeling that a first-hand male witness was more likely to be taken seriously than the testimony of a woman. Then comes another piece of apparent male chauvinism. Now prepared to believe that Jesus' body has vanished, the two men are said to return 'home', heartlessly leaving Mary alone to ponder what might have happened. But they had no home in Jerusalem: they were homeless, having thrown in their lot with Jesus. It would again make more sense if Mary was providing a roof over their heads and, unable to drag her away, they went back to her place to await her return.

Then came that mystical experience in which Mary found herself once more being comforted by her soulmate. At this ecstatic point, Mary could have opted to keep it all to herself and live in that joyous moment forever. Instead, she searches out the disciples to tell them to shake off their shock and fear: Jesus was still able to comfort and inspire: all they had to do was allow what had happened to her to happen to them and transmit their confidence to others. Her close relationship with Jesus had led to a unique understanding of his mind. This engendered the expectation that by simply replicating all that Jesus said and did, his

'Way', the whole world could be saved from its Godless ways (or sins, if we must use the word); saved from self-destruction.

Thus, her hopes on that first Easter morning differed from most of ours. We have been schooled to think that Jesus died for the main purpose of cancelling our individual mistakes. The schooling continues in the traditional Easter hymns we sing and would have been perpetuated, had we read the appointed passage from Acts (10 34-43) this morning. However, such passages were parts of a lengthy answer to the question on many lips: 'Why did Jesus have to die?' A few weeks ago I passed on the suggestion that to ask the question 'Why?' about any catastrophe was to ask the wrong question. The death of Jesus was the worst of catastrophes. To ask the question "Why?" of his death at that time was to invite the answer 'because of mans sinfulness'. All bad happenings were considered to be divine punishment for bad deeds. Jesus set out to change that misconception. He had already sent his disciples out to 'forgive sins', which merely meant: tell all who you visit 'we're not here to tell you how bad you all are, like religious people you may know, but how good you can be!' If, instead, the question asked is 'What can I do to mitigate Jesus' death?' and decide that it is 'By acting like Jesus', sin is deleted because, for while we act like Jesus, we cannot sin. The end product is the same but the route is different: instead of getting there as an individual by believing in a divisive proposition, we get there by acting inclusively, to the benefit of others.

For Mary, it was the latter prospect that excited her and sent her dashing to tell the other disciples. Jesus was still able to engage with them and they with Him.

Mary was already doing the things He would have done, lifting crushed spirits. We can, each & everyone one of us, act as compassionately as Jesus did, if and when we put our minds to it. For me, like Mary, this is the essence of Easter joy and happiness. Easter is more than a personal treat, like finding an Easter egg: its more like knowing that each day we can scatter corn, confident that each grain will be found by a chick or hen and nourish God's brood. The fact that death did not end the

outpouring of compassion through Jesus and need not end it for us, ever, is a blessing and future bonus but above all a present possibility: not just distant hope but reality. The sooner we Christians put compassion ahead of sin on our agenda for life, the sooner we will once again inspire new generations of truth-seekers.

*Neville*

*P.S The sermon delivered was made more child-friendly to accommodate the larger- than expected number of children who came!*