

## **Easter Sunday, Year A**

Acts 10:34-43, Colossians 3:1-4, John 20:1-18

Easter Sunday is one of the best days of the year! It holds such promise. As a teenager I used to love walking with my father the two miles down from our house to the Forbury Gardens in Reading to join in the 8.00 o'clock Easter morning service. It was such a joyful occasion. The sun would already be up and the garden was bright with spring flowers.

Much in the way that the church has been decorated today. An echo of the Garden of Eden and a foretaste of the restoration of it in the heavenly Jerusalem to come.

This morning I invite you to join me in the garden. Not the one outside or the one in Reading but the one of your imagination when you heard this morning's gospel reading.

It is before sunrise; in fact it is still dark. All colour has been washed out of the landscape. We see we are not alone in the garden. We see a woman, heading for the tomb where the body of Jesus has been laid. It is Mary Magdalene, one of the group of women close to Jesus, who were at the cross at his crucifixion and watched his body being entombed.

Why is she here, in the dark? It's as if she cannot bear to be apart from Jesus, even though he is now a corpse.

Does the darkness and lack of colour reflect the bleakness of her own heart? And as we too stand here in the darkness might there be something of this bleakness lurking in our own hearts? Not that we would acknowledge it openly, of course, not today.

Now we see that Mary has spotted that the stone covering the tomb entrance has been removed. Well, it's a good thing, surely? Now she can get closer to Jesus. But she cannot do it. She panics, freezes. And we wonder: is there, perhaps, a stone for us that keeps Jesus at arm's length? Would we panic if it were removed?

Well, Mary does panic and jumps to the conclusion that "they" have removed Jesus's body and it is now elsewhere.

In a sense, of course, she is right. Jesus is elsewhere, in bodily form, as she will discover. But at this moment Mary cannot think of any explanation other than that a third party has removed the dead body.

We see Mary in her panic run off to report this, presumably to Jesus's disciples. And we are left alone with our thoughts in the dark. Do we, who know more, wait here with confidence, with hope, with breathless anticipation for the great reveal? Or is it for us something of a non-event? Just part of the church calendar.

Now we see Peter and another disciple racing one another to the tomb.

It is not that they disbelieve Mary, but they are eager to see for themselves. Are we perhaps like that? Are there things in the Christian faith that we don't quite accept because we haven't seen it for ourselves? Are we eager to discover more?

Now we see the second disciple, maybe it's John, look into the empty tomb. Well not entirely empty, because the strips of linen that bound the body of Jesus are still there. Can you see? It's becoming lighter now, both in the sky and in the resurrection revelation.

We see Peter, bold, brash Peter, actually go into the tomb. He points out that the cloth that had bound Jesus's head is there, lying just where it would have been when Jesus's body was lain there.

Perhaps we recall how the resurrected Lazarus came out of his tomb still bound in the linen cloths. But today's scenario speaks of a different resurrection. The linen cloths are still in the tomb, but, unlike Lazarus, there is no body inside them. And no Jesus to call "come out". Jesus has just gone.

Peter goes into the tomb first but it is John who sees and believes that Jesus is alive. But this in itself is perplexing.

Despite all that Jesus tried to tell them, they do not understand that it was *imperative* that he rise from the dead. Do we understand this? Or do we see the resurrection as a nice add-on extra to the story of the cross, interesting but not material?

What are Peter and John to do with this new understanding that Jesus is alive? Well, of course, they go to tell the others. And what do we do? Tell others also? Maybe.

Do we ever ask ourselves whether we actually believe that the resurrection is more than just a nice ending to the story, sugar-coating perhaps the horror of the crucifixion. That the truth of the resurrection is fundamental to our faith, more than the birth in Bethlehem and even the death on the cross. Do we really believe that Jesus is actually alive now, today, with the same Holy Spirit power to do good and to heal?

But I digress. Back to the garden because we see that Mary has returned. She's back at the tomb, crying. Of course she is; her greatest friend is dead. She looks into the tomb just to check he is not there. Do you see the two angels in white that she sees seated at either end of where Jesus's body was? Do you hear them asking Mary why she is crying?

What a question? Isn't it obvious? Mary is too grief stricken to realise that these are angels and might have the answer to where "they" have taken her Lord. She turns away.

And, blinded by her tears, nearly bumps into a man she takes to be the gardener. He too asks her why she is crying. For this is Jesus, who knows that tears are inappropriate. He sees that Mary's thinking is from the wrong side of the cross, grieving and sorrowful, conscious of shortcomings, of things left unsaid, of all the things that still need to be put right. The grieving for sin side, not the '*it is finished!*' resurrection side.

When Mary again asks for the location of the body of Jesus, Jesus replies with just one word, "Mary". Just as he called Lazarus out of the tomb by name, so now he calls Mary out of her tomb of grief and darkness, by name..

Here, this morning, in the resurrection garden, in this foretaste of the restoration of Eden, do we hear Jesus calling our names? Chris, Peter, Susie... What peace and hope does Jesus want to impart to us this resurrection morning? Where do we need a personal word or touch from the Lord today? He is here; he is risen.

John doesn't leave his resurrection account at this point because then it would be incomplete. To his account John adds, *Jesus said... 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'*

This is John's reference to the ascension. Matthew alludes to it, the Gospel of Mark mentions it and Luke gives a detailed account.

We don't give much attention to the ascension. In Switzerland it is a national holiday. Here it passes almost unnoticed. But without the ascension the resurrection would still be amazing but fall short. Jesus would be left in the garden, or the upper room or whichever one place he might occupy, but nowhere else.

Because of the ascension of Jesus to his Father, the culmination of his resurrection, with the subsequent outpouring of Holy Spirit Jesus can be present everywhere, with everyone. And as a consequence, his Father becomes our Father, his God our God, in a far more real sense.

As we rest in the garden this morning may it be that we can say, "Today I have seen the Lord!" Where there was sorrow, where there was darkness, where all was bleak, "Now I have seen the Lord."

May we be reassured and encouraged today by joy, by hope, by the presence of the Risen Lord who has conquered all. He is here! He has risen! Hallelujah!  
Amen

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