

## John 20:1-18 – Sermon for 11am – Easter Day

It is Easter Day; the day on which the whole of the Christian faith hinges. A day when light shines in the darkness, life comes out of death, hope rises from despair and love conquers mortality itself. This is the highest of celebrations in our year, the holiest of days. And it is because on this day, so long ago, Jesus was raised to life from the dead.

The story we have just read is the confused account of the first few people to see this resurrection. They are unsure of what to make of it and they certainly didn't expect it. Instead, they are the ones who were first to experience the Easter effect; of hope in despair and light in the blackness.

There's Mary Magdalene who came to the tomb to mourn and perform duties for the dead body. Her world was black. She had lost her teacher, her master, her friend and with it the hopes and dreams of a different life.

There was Peter and the other disciple, probably John, both of whom had been in Jesus' inner circle and both of whom were left hollow and scared by their own failings in the last few days and by the loss of their leader. Their hopes for the renewal of their kingdom were dashed and they were left spiritually orphaned, lives in peril, and very alone.

The empty tomb stands on the face of it as a further hammer blow to their situation. Not only has their master and teacher gone but now his body was gone too. Surely the disgrace of the cross was enough; but grave-robbing as well – was there no end to the calamity? They were sinking deeper and deeper into the darkness. And the tomb, a symbol of death, features in every sentence; but even the tomb left Mary, Peter and John without the consolation of a body to care for, the body of the friend who they loved.

Let's just take a second to stop here and think. We are so used to the Easter story that it is easy to breeze over it. And if we do, it can feel disjointed, as the unbridled joy at the resurrection fails to meet us where we are. Our world, our lives, and the lives of those around us contains some of the blackest features imaginable. You don't have to care for people for long before you find yourself staring at some of the saddest features of the world we live in. Perhaps all of us are damaged in some ways by our history, certainly some more than others; and sometimes that damage can seem irreparable and so complicated no-one can fix it. Whether that damage is from - grief, sickness, the evil deeds of others or our own particular guilt or feelings of inadequacy - we watch and despair of recovery and our world looks black or grey as we grope our way through. Joys become insipid relief and pains become unbearable. For some mortality confronts us fearfully, or else for others, our mortality is unattainable relief which we wish for but never comes.

The tomb is an image we can relate to. Our lives, or the lives of others, or the focus of the world news, all seem locked in a cold, dark, place of decay and despair. It feels like life is unfixable, dreams unattainable, and real joy feels like a rainbow that we catch a glimpse of but keeps shifting further away.

However, for Jesus' friends at the tomb, it didn't quite add up. They expected a locked-up corpse but instead were greeted by empty cloth, empty linen and an empty cave. The huge stone was removed and the body gone with no stench of death and no hint of decay. Grave-robbers don't leave expensive linen cloth and steal bodies. Roman soldiers don't let grave-robbers steal political

prisoners. Dead people don't recuperate, still heavily injured and on the edge of death to shift huge rocks to escape and evade Roman guards, and if they do, they don't hang around the grave pretending to be a gardener! The idea that the political prisoner, executed, would be moved for security to prevent his friends pretending that he had risen from the dead, only for the body not to be produced by the authorities in order to squash the resurrection rumour is ridiculous.

To Jesus' friends, and to all people down the centuries from then until now, the simplest and most compelling explanation is that, contrary to the laws of nature, by divine intervention, Jesus was raised from death to life. This explains the empty tomb, the angels, the grave clothes, the confusion of Jesus' friends, the sightings of Jesus afterwards, the inability of the authorities to squash the rumours and the fact that Jesus' friends went to their deaths in the end still proclaiming the truth of what they saw.

Mary stood weeping outside the tomb; confused and afraid. But as she gazed into it, instead of finding death, she found life. She found the power of God embodied in two of his messengers sitting waiting to meet her. She saw the emptiness and the profound impotence of the grave and then heard the call of Jesus from outside. The grave had nothing for her but there was a call from the life outside. Not only did God's messengers ask why she was crying, but Jesus did too. Mary stood at the entrance of the tomb, the meeting point of life and death and she heard that there was now no need for tears in either place.

Her confusion reigned and in it she mistook Jesus for a gardener – obviously not a weak, half-dead individual but a strong, healthy man. There is some humour in the mistaking and you can almost hear Jesus' chuckle as he affectionately says her name, "Mary!"

And suddenly, realisation and relief come flooding in and, not understanding, not knowing what to do with herself, she rushes to her teacher and her friend. We do not know how much time passed until Jesus has to untangle himself from Mary's grasp, but when he does, his instruction is clear – to go and tell people what has happened. But also, Jesus' friends' status has changed – they are brothers, sharing the same father and the same God as Jesus. Mary reports that she has seen the Lord, the name for God, and tells them her story.

What a story it is. And what this means for us is that this tomb-like cage in which we find ourselves isn't as dark and despairing as we had thought. There are already chinks of light coming in from the doorway, there is already the scent of fresh air bringing life to our situation, and there is already hope for those who have lost it.

Easter is all about Jesus rising from the dead, which is spectacular, but the implications reach so much further than the miraculous event of one man. Just as Mary found herself standing in the space between life and death and finding death empty and beaten and instead life calling to her, so do we. We stand in a place where death is no longer the end. If God can raise one person, he can raise billions! But we also stand in a place where we can hear Jesus' call to life for each one of us. We may not recognise him at first, or we may not fully understand, but Jesus calls each of us to turn away from the things which bring decay and darkness to our lives and receive his life and light instead.

With Jesus' call, there is new life for those of us who feel like we've screwed up. Maybe you're one of those people who carry regrets around everywhere you go; things you wish you'd not done and things you wish you had done but you didn't. The way of guilt is the way of despair and Jesus calls you out of it to follow him in new life with a clean slate. Jesus is the risen saviour who breaks through the hold of guilt upon us.

With Jesus' call to life, we can look at the darkness in the world around us with new eyes. Just as life came into the dark tomb and the darkness couldn't hold it, so Jesus is the life that we all need in the world around us. The people irreparably broken can be made new. The complex situations where darkness reigns can be evacuated with glorious light and life can flood back.

With Jesus' call to life, we can stare death and sickness and decay in the face and see how empty they are. Even as we approach our end, life calls to us in Jesus – ask anyone – we all look naturally forward to something else when we die. And it is through Jesus that this life can be something other than a pipe dream. In him, we have hope that each of us can live without decay and see a new world where God is with his people.

So each of us, this Easter morning stands on the cusp, as Mary did, of life and death. The tomb - the symbol of death - is empty and emptied of all its power. But we can still choose to enter it. We can still choose to ignore the call to life from Jesus. But for those of us who hear Jesus' voice and turn away from the old ways which bring death, decay, destruction and our own personal brand of despair, there is new life. There's a clean slate. There is hope shining in the dark. There's a new dawn on a world with meaning. There's the laying down of our guilt and baggage. There's the promise of life hereafter. There's an open embrace awaiting us from Jesus Christ himself, who although he died, was raised to life and never died again and now lives eternally and reigns with God himself, and yet calls us his brothers and sisters. Please don't leave today without answering his call to life.

Amen.