

Sermon for Easter Sunday 2021 – Acts 10: 34 – 43; John 20: 1 – 18

“A new body, too tender to touch – and she, kneeling in gold and blue, her perfume pot left behind. All this above the clutter of hassocks, cushions etc which have had to be removed from the church.”

I wrote those words while I was sitting in the Lady Chapel in St Michael’s in January. I’ve taken to coming in here to pray while the church has been closed – sitting under and facing the big picture of the moment when Mary Magdalene recognises the resurrected Jesus. We just heard the account in our Gospel reading. Back in January the news was bleak, and Easter seemed a long way off. It seemed strange to be sitting with a picture of the Resurrection. But these weeks have been a journey towards what we hope will be a kind of resurrection for us all. We hope, I’m sure, over the coming weeks and months for a careful and gradual return to some kind of normality. But this is not a certain resurrection. We can’t be sure yet when or if it will all happen as planned.

But, by contrast, Jesus’s Resurrection we know did happen. And it changed the world.

It’s difficult to talk about the Resurrection because it is so bizarre. We can comprehend the birth of Jesus, because birth, although miraculous, is also familiar. We can comprehend His violent, painful, unjustified and shameful death on the Cross on trumped up charges because, sadly there are plenty of examples of our inhumanity to one another today. But the Resurrection is beyond our experience. Things like that don’t happen.

The first disciples found it just as difficult to comprehend. And they were on the spot. Mary, coming very early to the tomb, while it was still dark, with her spices, hoping to provide a last service to her Lord by anointing his body. Blinded by her tears when she thinks his body has been stolen. Suddenly hearing his familiar voice speaking her name. Knowing beyond all doubt that this is not the gardener at work early, but her beloved Lord.

Simon Peter and John, the beloved disciple, see the empty and folded wrappings that had been around Jesus’ his body and cannot understand what has happened. Peter, typically, goes into the tomb first, followed by John. And we’re told that John, “saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture that he must rise from the dead.” (John 20: 8 – 9). His emotions and his intuition get ahead of his understanding.

Then there’s the pair on the Road to Emmaus who are joined by a stranger with an extraordinary ability to interpret the Scriptures. “Was it not necessary”, he says, “that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” (Luke 24: 13f). They invite him to eat with them, and as he blesses and breaks the bread they realise that this is Jesus himself teaching them. Jesus continues for some time to appear and disappear among his disciples in this way. Eventually, even Thomas, the most sceptical of them all, has his own special encounter with Jesus and confesses him to be his Lord and his God. (John 20: 24f). The disciples are convinced. They have met the risen Lord.

So, why does it matter that Jesus rose from the dead? It matters, because the Crucifixion becomes then not a defeat, but a victory over sin and death, evil and injustice. A victory in which we are included. As it says in 1 Peter "He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed." (1 Peter 2:24). A victory which makes possible a new kingdom, the kingdom of God.

It matters because it demonstrates that Jesus is who He claimed to be, the Son of God, the Messiah. Death could not hold God Himself, the Lord of life. As John says earlier in his Gospel "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." (John 3:16)

It matters because Jesus is still alive, and experienced as alive by millions of Christians all over the world.

Going back to the picture of Mary and Jesus in the garden where we started, Mary had to learn not to hold on to Jesus. As they encountered the risen Jesus, all of the disciples had to learn that things were not going to be the same as before. Because Jesus' life can no longer be contained. They are going to have to share Him with the whole world. And that is what they did. Because Jesus did rise from the dead that frightened grief-stricken band were transformed, under Peter's leadership, and through the power of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, into the dynamic core of what became the church.

And Jesus is with us now as we meet together in His name. He will always be with us, just as he was with the first disciples, comforting us, guiding us, challenging us and encouraging us to reach out to others and to share our faith - whatever happens over the coming months.

Alleluia. Christ is risen!

Amen

Diana Young 1 April 2021