

Where is hope now?

Easter Sermon, Sunday the 12th of April 2020

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John 20:1-18 The Resurrection of Jesus

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.' Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went towards the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' She said to them, 'They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.' When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?' Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.' Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabbouni!' (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, 'Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."' Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

The resurrection story always brings a reminder to me of one of my most embarrassing moments, and there have been a few....

When I was going through the process of being assessed for the priesthood, that is I thought, was I good enough? I was asked this question "you are asked to comment on this headline newspaper report "DNA tests show that archeologists have found the bones of Jesus buried outside Jerusalem" - what is your reaction, what do you think?

I smiled wryly and said “well I would say it’s not true, these can’t be the bones of Jesus”. My interviewer came back to me sharply “No come on, that’s not good enough, I didn’t ask you what you would say, I asked you what would you think; what is going through your mind? The question is there of course to find out where you are at in your faith, how strong is your faith in the resurrection, how do you understand it and how do you explain it to others? Oh dear was what I thought, I’m going to get found out, he’s going to find the doubting Thomas in me which he knows is there. The question of course is intended to find out if you have pondered deeply enough about the resurrection, if the bones of Jesus have been found then there is no bodily resurrection. My head sank and I said “I don’t know, I don’t know what I’d think to be honest, believing in the bodily resurrection of Jesus is still work in progress for me. Sometimes I can believe in it, I’m sold on it hook line and sinker, but often I have doubts and it worries me. You might be thinking ‘so how did you get this job ?! And that’s a very valid question which I sometimes ask myself! Fortunately, maybe, the interviewer announced at the end that he was putting me forward and recommending me for training, maybe he could see that I was indeed work in progress. More on this in a moment.

Our Easter gospel reading recalls that Mary Magdalene was the first person to witness the resurrection and it was she who ran to the disciples to ‘tell’ them. Now you will have noticed that Mary is a woman and Jesus’ disciples were all men. Some people believe it or not, think that the Church should not allow women to preach, they may be entitled to their view, which is based on a certain short passage in the bible. Maybe this gospel story confounds their view, because here we have Mary Magdalene, a woman, telling the disciples, men, that Jesus has risen from the dead. Or more correctly, that his body has been taken. There is a saying that ‘if we hadn’t had women preachers, then we wouldn’t have known about the resurrection’, there could be another one which says that ‘if we didn’t have male theologians then the women wouldn’t never have understood the resurrection or what it meant’.

And it’s true isn’t it – look at the text. It is the women who discover the resurrection, they are the ones who are ‘there’. In John’s gospel it is the fascinating character of Mary Magdalene who goes and tells Peter and John.

And we can imagine the story runs some like this: Peter and John look at each other muttering “huh what” as they look back at Mary Magdalene, puzzled, what are you on about they think. So they run down to the tomb. They get there, have a quick glance around to make sure nobody is looking, the stone has been rolled away by someone and they look inside, tentatively, afraid to go in. They aren’t supposed to go in, it is only the women who should go in to tend to the body. But this time they go in. And there’s nothing there, they ‘don’t understand’ the text says. It’s like ‘huh we don’t know, but it’s still all over anyway, nothing changes, they’ve taken his body’. The text says they ‘go home’. But Mary doesn’t, she stays. And that’s when the magic begins to dawn on her and she hears, then she sees Jesus. And she is overwhelmed with tears of joy. Then, she goes back to the disciples and she ‘announces’ to them ‘I have seen the Lord’. Mary Magdalene is indeed the first witness to the resurrection of Jesus. Wow.

There are two, very different narratives in this short section, the first is ‘Oh no the body has gone’ the second is ‘he’s here, he’s alive’. And this is what Mary Magdalene ‘announces’ to the disciples. If we hadn’t had women preachers, then we wouldn’t have known about the resurrection.

I am fortunate enough to have been to the Garden Tomb outside the old city walls in Jerusalem. I could tell you that my wrestling with the resurrection narrative was put to bed when I went to the tomb. Maybe I am a doubting Thomas and like him I just needed to put my hand in. And of course, there are many credible doubts about whether or not the Garden Tomb is actually the place where he was buried. We don’t know if it is the tomb. And in many ways maybe it doesn’t matter, because he’s not there anyway. And I went because I was looking for something, I think looking for signs of Jesus, which maybe I have done several times in my wanderings around Israel and Palestine and probably I’ve looked for signs of Jesus in many other places too.

What I can tell you is that I’m sure I didn’t find any signs of Jesus in the major religious sites I’ve visited, and forgive me, that’s more about me than it is about the power of these places.

But back at the Garden Tomb, which is in a wonderful quiet garden, and which indeed may have been Joseph of Arimathea's garden where Jesus was buried according to our gospel stories. It was not a particularly busy place on the day I went and I just sat and waited in the warm summery garden watching and waiting as people took their photographs. I smiled as I watched one guy make a video of himself standing in front of the tomb entrance, it was quite something listening to him telling the story about where he was and what happened there, I was for a moment that fly on the wall.

And when they'd all gone and there were no people to watch any more I went in and stood there on my own. It makes me tingle just now even recalling it. Standing there, looking at the place where they laid him, maybe. Fear and trembling came over me I can tell you. Not knowing what to do, what to think, just holding on to the bars of the gate, which separates his final resting place, to stop people chipping off pieces of rock from the tomb's sides to take home as souvenirs. Holding on to the bars to steady myself, staring at the empty space, just me, nobody else, wondering, asking, looking at the cold stone carved bed imagining him lying there. And imagining him getting up. Wow indeed. I think I stared for many minutes hoping that nobody else would come to disturb us, and I came to believe I think more than anything I have ever experienced, that this completely irrational thing happened. It happened here right in front of me. How stupid of me? If God created the cosmos and formed planets and moved mountains, created rivers and seas and everything in it, however. How stupid of me, of course he can bring someone, Jesus, back from the dead.

And then I came to my senses and I thought - but Jesus didn't say 'stand and stare at the empty tomb when I'm dead'. He said 'go and do something, go and tell the others'. So feeling rather self conscious now, back in the real world, I walked out of the narrow entrance to the tomb and stood there adjust my eyes to the bright sunlight. I really don't mean to be flippant, but when you're on your own and you've nobody to say 'that was something' you sort of think 'right, what shall I do next?' So I thought of Mark's gospel and his words 'He is not here'.

Because he clearly wasn't, and I thought of Paul's words to the Ephesians 'he lives in our hearts through faith' because I had been, in John Wesley's words 'strangely moved', and yes it had been totally unexpected. I was just doing the tourist thing in my mind, cynical more than anything else. But the best experiences are always unexpected aren't they?

I could tell you that's the end of it, no more doubts, but that wouldn't be true. I'm far too much a fickle human than for that to be the case. But there is now something that I never ever doubt. And that is God's over-powering of all that brings us death and his over-powering of death itself. This Covid 19 virus may kill many of us, but that is not the end, it should never be the end of our story. Each of us can and do live on, eternally. I have absolutely no doubt about God's complete and utter destruction of the power of death. He can over-power all badness, all evil, anything that this world, that we, that evil doers can do. God's defeat of death is never in question for me, ever. That is the power of God's Love.

And from those first moments when Mary Magdalene saw what she believed was Jesus alive, that is what she knew. I'm certain that she had a massive penny dropping moment outside that tomb, her tears were turned to laughter. My Lord has defeated death, he is here – death has lost and life and love has won.

Theologian Keith Giles says that we as Christians have an unusual fascination with the death of Jesus. We know that what Jesus did for us, on the cross, and that it is an astounding act of love and sacrifice. And that without this, none of us would have any hope, and yet Paul the Apostle declares that, "...if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins." (1 Cor.15:17). In other words - we should be looking at life and not at death. Maybe we do have a rather morbid fascination with death, with Jesus death, with life after death. To the point where sometimes the only thing we can say about Jesus is that, "Jesus loves you and he died on the cross for your sins". That may be important to our faiths, but the trump card is surely that we are given life, new life, resurrected life.

Of this I have no doubt, that death is defeated, to the point where we can, God willing have little fear, of the present or of the future. Christ wills us to be secure, yes we are saved, we are free, to fight for justice, to live in the abundance of the life-giving love which we are now given, because of what happened on that first Easter; however it happened, however it can be explained, it matters not. What we now know, is that death is defeated and we should live accordingly. Jesus says "I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing."- John 14:12

However you understand the resurrection, whether it be bodily or representatively, neither of them hits the important point which is that the resurrection bears no wisdom, no logic, no reason, no sensibleness. It is completely irrational; it does not follow the rules of this world. Which are that on the blackest of days, when the God-man Jesus died, when the powerful won (as they do) and everything, absolutely everything seemed to be lost. It was followed in three days by resurrection. God didn't just bounce back, God blew away all semblance of and all instance of death, God defeated evil once for all. And this is what we see now, in this life, that resurrection gives us the possibility of new life and new hope in these darkest of days. We will rise.

Christ is Risen! He is Risen indeed!