

Sermon – Easter Sunday – 12th April 2020

One of the joys of the clocks going forward in March is the opportunity to see just a few more sunrises. Last Sunday, I watched the most extraordinary spectacle as the sky went through various stages of orange as the sun came up. Part of the joy of sunrise is its promise of daylight, of things becoming clearer, or the world emerging from its slumber. And we use the word “dawn” to signify the ways in which sunrise reveals things. The dawning of a new era; or even the verb “it dawned on me”. One of the reasons that I particularly love the 6 am Service of Light on Easter morning is that opportunity to allow the Easter message to gradually dawn on us as we are lit first by the light of the new fire; then by the Paschal candle; and finally by the sun.

This morning’s gospel reading begins while it is still dark, at the beginning of the day. And we follow the story of those first disciples as they try to make sense of what they are seeing – and indeed what they are not seeing.

Let’s start with John – the writer of this gospel. He is with Peter when Mary comes running and explains that Jesus is no longer in the tomb. Like Peter, he does not hesitate to run to the tomb. We have no idea what might have been going through his mind. Whether he didn’t trust what Mary told him; whether he wanted to see for himself; whether he was simply compelled by the love he had for Jesus to find out what had happened to his bodily remains. We do know that he was keen to get there, outstripping Peter on the way. He hung back while Peter entered the tomb first, and yet: “then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed.”

John’s gospel has been clear about Jesus’s divinity from the outset. While the other gospels recognise the ambiguity that surrounded Jesus’s identity, for John, Jesus is God and his gospel is written to enable his readers to see and believe. The way the gospel writer speaks of his own response can in a sense be our guide. He saw the empty tomb; and he believed. There is something beautiful about the recognition that the disciples did not yet *understand*. We are reminded that faith can come before understanding. That we can believe in something that we do not fully understand.

Peter’s story is a little different. He, too, is approached by Mary Magdalene and on hearing that the tomb is empty, rushes to see for himself. He bounds into the tomb ahead of John, impetuous as ever. At this stage, though, we know what Peter has *seen*, but we are not clear about what he *believes*. Probably he doesn’t know what to make of it. All we know is that he makes his way home. The end of John’s gospel tells of further resurrection appearances of Jesus to the disciples. When they are out fishing, it is Peter who jumps into the water having realised that it was Jesus who told them where to cast the net. Yet it is not until he is forced to confront his own denial that he can fully appreciate what has taken place. The gospel recounts the conversation between Jesus and Peter when Peter is asked whether he loves Jesus three times, mirroring his three betrayals. Finally what has happened is dawning on him.

And what about Mary Magdalene? What I appreciate about the way this story is told is the way we can watch the truth dawning on Mary. First, she finds the stone rolled away. Her assumption is that the body has been removed, and so she tries to find out where the body has been placed. Peter and John return with her to the tomb, enter it, and discover, as she had, that it is empty. If Mary had hoped for enlightenment from her friends, she was, perhaps, disappointed. They could only discover what she had already found out, before returning to their homes.

Yet Mary stays. Not only that, but she weeps. She expresses the sorrow and anguish of the last days, and the morning's discovery. And as she weeps, she is met, first by angels, and then by Jesus himself. All she needs to hear from Jesus is her name for the truth to dawn. She knows that she has seen the Lord. And having remained at the tomb, allowing herself to experience the pain and grief of loss she is then ready to hear those words from Jesus that she is not to hold on to him. The truth has dawned, and it is enough to release her from any need to cling.

In this morning's gospel reading, we hear how the truth dawns on three different people. And in the coming weeks we will hear a number of equivalent stories as the risen Jesus meets different people. Each of us comes to recognise the truth in different ways. For John it is something instinctive; for Peter it must come at a moment when his impetuosity has paused for a moment; for Mary it involves an acknowledgement of emotions, and a relational encounter.

How is it that we put ourselves in a good place to see and acknowledge the truth? What is it that helps us to see more clearly; that clarifies our vision; that enhances our understanding?

As we have all said perhaps too often in these last weeks, this is a time like no other. And yet there is no doubt that God continues to be present in the world. So how is it that we are going to hear God's voice. That we are going to distinguish that voice from so many others that are clamouring for our attention?

One of the things that has interested me over these past weeks is the way different people have responded to the situation. It is probably fair to say that I have had more meetings than usual, as people have sought to remain connected via different means of communication. While some people have quickly built a structure into their lives, others have become increasingly busy – sometimes of necessity, and sometimes less so. Inevitably there are countless factors that lead us to respond in different ways to challenging circumstances.

But the question we need to ask ourselves on this Easter Sunday is how we are going to ensure that, in the middle of an unsettling situation, we are going to give ourselves a good chance to hear what God has to say. It is likely that, like for Mary, Peter and John, the answer for each one of us will be different. But the dawn *is* rising and there is always hope to be found. Let's give ourselves the best possible chance to grasp the truth in these uncertain times.

Amen