

Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 4th April 2021
Easter Sunday – 9.30 service

Collect

God of glory,
by the raising of your Son
you have broken the chains of death and hell:
fill your Church with faith and hope;
for a new day has dawned
and the way to life stands open
in our Saviour Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Acts 10:34-43

Then Peter began to speak to them: 'I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.'

John 20:1-18

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.

Sermon

I love John's depiction of the resurrection. To begin with, it's a dynamic story, with both movement and stillness. It's also visual. However it is that you see this scene in your mind's eye, John offers sufficient details to make that image vibrant and real. And finally, the characters are so relatable. As he narrates, John always refers to himself as "the disciple whom Jesus loved". I wonder whether you find that endearing or just a little annoying. And in this story, he just can't help himself but emphasises that he outran Peter to the tomb. The disciples were very human, with as many foibles as each of us, that's for sure.

And then there's Mary. The first one to discover the empty tomb, yet with no desire to publicise the fact. She runs to Peter and John because she knows very well that the news is going to be something beyond her comprehension. Yet after Peter and John have returned home, she lingers. She can't make sense of what she is seeing. And more than that, she is heartbroken. The disappearance of Jesus's body deepens her grief.

If we pause for a moment at the end of this morning's gospel reading, we have rather a peculiar situation. John has seen the empty tomb, and believes in the resurrection. Peter has also seen the empty tomb, but we are not clear about his state of belief. It is not for some time that he will be confronted by Jesus about his betrayal, as Jesus asks him three times whether he loves him. For the moment, at the end of this morning's reading, both disciples have returned home. Which seems astonishingly mundane for Easter morning. Surely there is a party to have. Or indeed a ministry to prepare for. Only Mary actually begins to tell others the good news, by telling the other disciples what she has seen and heard.

And yet for all its peculiarity, I wonder whether this is actually quite a helpful way to understand the hope of Easter.

It can be easy to assume that certain events call for certain emotions. We are supposed to be happy and celebrate on our birthday. Likewise Christmas and Easter. We can all think of any range of events which are supposed to be enjoyable – when we expect our emotions to match the perceived joy of the occasion. Yet we can all also remember times that simply didn't work like that. The Christmas when everyone was unwell; the birthday when you have an argument with someone; any significant event following bereavement.

Easter is perhaps the most hopeful day of the Christian calendar, yet if we allow ourselves to really enter into this morning's gospel reading, that doesn't mean that there isn't room for a range of emotions. It seems that John experiences a deep sense of joy, founded on faith, quite quickly. Yet when Peter returns home there is unfinished business. His emotions must be more complex – perhaps he still hasn't fully come to believe. And for Mary the emotions must surely be mixed. The desolation of Jesus's death, followed by the even worse fear that his body has been removed. And then, even as she realises that he is risen, he tells her that she must not hold on to him. That he cannot remain on earth for long. She seeks out the company of the disciples to begin to make sense of all that she has experienced.

Perhaps this is the nature of Easter hope. That we all experience it differently. That it is indeed a cause for celebration, and more importantly a call to action, yet this will look different for each one of us, just as it did for those who encountered the resurrection in person. John returned to his home,

perhaps to reflect on the time he had spent with Jesus; perhaps to spend time with Mary, Jesus's mother, before he continues his own path of discipleship; almost certainly to pray. Peter also returned to his home, yet perhaps his prayers were more anguished. And for Mary, being with other people was important.

Circumstances also change the nature of hope. Perhaps you can remember your feelings last Easter, when we were unable to meet for worship, and we were less than a month into the first lockdown. It was a glorious sunny day; many of us followed an order of service at home, and shared pictures of our Easter candles. I expect that many of us were hoping that the worst of the pandemic was over and that normality might return before Christmas.

This year is different again. We have spent a year re-examining our relationship with hope. You may be able to identify positive aspects to that. Small acts of kindness that have made a disproportionate difference. An enjoyment of nature that has been rekindled, or even discovered for the first time. Exploration of the local area in a way you haven't considered before.

Yet we cannot ignore the challenges. The number of individuals bereaved; the amount of time spent unable to see loved ones or meet up with friends; the financial impact for individuals and internationally; the inequalities that have been heightened.

Entering into John's story of the resurrection, one thing that strikes me is that the hope of resurrection is something that dawns on us gradually. While Easter day is always special, I also appreciate the fact that there is a whole Easter season, running right through until Pentecost. That is because we need time to allow the Easter hope to envelope us. Time to make sense of where hope lies now.

This year, I think that the value of the Easter season may be greater than ever, because we all need time to recover from what has been a very hard and unusual year. We all need to be gentle with ourselves and one another, and we probably also need support from one another as we look forward with hope.

While last year we may have hoped that things would return to normal rapidly, this year we are in a very different situation. There are very tangible signs of hope, yet we are probably also less inclined to think that a "return to normal" is either possible or desirable.

The course that lies ahead of us is uncertain – just as it was for those first disciples, trying to make sense of what they saw at the empty tomb. Yet one thing holds us firm. And that is the knowledge of God's love surrounding us, and the promise that light and life will always overcome.

Amen