

Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 17th April 2022
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 have seen the Lord.” So says Mary Magdalene in John’s beautiful account of the resurrection. “I have seen the Lord.” Words of recognition. Of faith. Words of encounter. Of trust. Of awe and wonder. And if we play a little with the intonation, I wonder whether there is also a question in there. “I have seen the Lord?” Is Mary Magdalene certain, or is she still asking? And even if she is certain for now, perhaps there are questions to come.

At the 6 o’clock Service of Light we heard Luke’s account of the resurrection. In that story, the women go to the tomb with spices they have prepared to tend to Jesus’s body. They find the empty tomb, and two men in dazzling clothes. The first words those men speak are: “Why do you look for the living among the dead?” On Easter morning, we know exactly what they mean. The women don’t understand. They’ve come to the wrong place. Death has been defeated once and for all. Jesus is risen.

But I wonder whether that is a question for us, too. A question about where we look for Easter hope. And indeed where we might find it. After all, it can seem at times as if hope is in short supply in our world at the moment.

And I wonder whether, if we place that question alongside Mary Magdalene’s words – I have seen the Lord – we really might get some way to discovering a deeper meaning to hope.

During Lent, some of us have been exploring the Bible in a little more detail. Throughout those sessions, one of the things that I have been emphasising is that when we read the Bible, we should be thinking about it as the story of God; the story of human beings; and the story especially of the various struggles that human beings have in trying to make sense of God.

As we looked at the Old Testament, we encountered Abraham as the father of the people of Israel. He found favour with God, and was supposed to be the one who would show people a new way of living out the love of God. What I love about Abraham – and it applies to every human being in the Bible in one way or another – is that there are times when he succeeds. And there are times when he fails.

The same is true in the New Testament. Jesus chooses his disciples, and there are times when they demonstrate great faith, loyalty, and indeed insight. And there are times, too, when they get things spectacularly wrong. James and John wanting places at Jesus’s right and left hands; Peter’s denial of Jesus – not just once, but three times.

Those men in dazzling white ask the women, “Why do you look for the living among the dead?” There is a challenge in those words. Where are we looking to find God? Are we looking in the right places? Once again, we don’t have to spend long reading the Old Testament to discover that throughout the ages, people have tended to make a connection between worldly success and God’s favour. And yet Jesus teaches us something very different. He came to serve, rather than be served. He was put to the most ignominious death. As we look for God, are we looking in the right places?

And yet I wonder whether there is just a little irony in the question, too. And perhaps this year we have a particularly poignant reason for wondering that. “Why do you look for the living among the dead?” For me this year, those words transported me to those images of the bombing of Mariupol in

the Ukraine, and especially the attack on the theatre. “Why do you look for the living among the dead?” In the case of either natural disaster, or an act of warfare, it’s obvious why we look for the living among the dead. Because we still have hope that they are there. That we can save someone from a scene of devastation and destruction. Because we simply cannot rest until we know that the survivors have been rescued.

In certain circumstances, looking for the living among the dead is a sign of the most profound hope.

So perhaps the question that is going to help us this Easter is something slightly different from the one that those men in dazzling white ask the women. Perhaps it’s a question about where we are looking for signs of God’s presence. And, even more specifically, what it is that we are looking for. And that’s where we return to those words of Mary Magdalene. “I have seen the Lord.”

What is it that made Mary say that? And what might lead us to do the same?

What we know from Mary’s experience is that there is room for a range of emotions in any encounter with God. We first meet her at the tomb in the darkness, and when she finds it empty, she runs to find Peter and John. We don’t know exactly what she was feeling at that point, but probably shocked. Perhaps terrified. She wanted the reassurance of the presence of other people. She also, perhaps, wanted them to confirm that she wasn’t mistaken.

And then, after Peter and John have had their own individual discoveries, we find that Mary remains outside the tomb, weeping. And it is there that Jesus meets her.

“Why are you looking for the living among the dead?” Because so often the place that Jesus meets us isn’t the place that we might expect. For Mary, it was in the depth of her despair that she really encountered the risen Christ.

In our Bible course, we discovered something similar. That the bigger story of the Old Testament shows us that it was in times of anguish that the people of Israel often dug deep and encountered God in new and significant ways.

Of course on Easter morning, it’s important to remember that God is there in our joy and celebration. The thing is, though, in some ways that is more obvious. We can feel the love of family and friends at joyful celebrations. We can recognise that love as coming from God.

It can be harder to keep on looking for those signs when things feel tougher. And that is why Mary Magdalene is such a wonderful guide. Because even as her heart is probably breaking, she can still declare, “I have seen the Lord.” She knows that she cannot hold on to the risen Christ – he tells her that. And yet she continues to believe in the love and the hope that she has found in him.

And so for us this Easter morning. We ask ourselves where we are looking for signs of God’s love. What it is that they might look like. The kindness of human beings one to another. The beauty of the world around us. Signs of love, big and small. And perhaps each time we notice one, we might join Mary Magdalene in declaring, “I have seen the Lord.” And perhaps we might help others to do the same.

Amen