



Revd Ro's Reflection on Easter Sunday

Year A

John 20.1-18

Acts 10.34-43

'Marley was dead. This must be distinctly understood, or nothing wonderful can come of the story I am going to relate.' If I asked what book these famous lines came from most people would know. Dickens makes the point at the beginning of 'A Christmas Carol.' I have been watching the series 'Rick Stein's Cornwall' and found it fascinating. At one point he is dealing with a visit Dickens made to Cornwall just before he wrote the novel. He was appalled by the working conditions of the tin and copper miners, particularly the children. There is a scene where Rick is standing by a large grave stone which is to the memory of a certain Dr Marley. Apparently Dickens told him he would make his name known worldwide! I dare say there were several candidates for the name but the point still holds. Dickens' whole story depends on the fact that Marley was dead, or nothing wonderful could come of the tale! I am not being trivial when I mention this. It is vitally important to St. John in his gospel. Jesus had been crucified, he was dead and buried, he makes it quite clear.

³⁸ 'After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission; so he came and removed his body. ³⁹Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. ⁴⁰They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews. ⁴¹ Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. ⁴² And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.' (John 19)

We have experienced Holy Week; we have heard the gospel account of the crucifixion. It is hard enough to listen to, the reality was horrific. One can only imagine the suffering of poor Mary as she stood at the foot of the cross of her son. Now it is all over and peace comes at last as Jesus is laid in the tomb. Incidentally, it is good to know that Nicodemus was here to finally serve his Lord in the

only way he could. No doubt he had been the lone voice in speaking up for Jesus as he stood before the Sanhedrin. Jesus was dead; we affirm it in our Creed, 'For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate, He suffered death and was buried.' And the Apostle's Creed puts it thus. 'he descended to the dead', It is central to faith. Some still hold that Jesus did not die; it was a miraculous escape from the cross; therefore resurrection was not a coming back to life. All the gospels rubbish this as nonsense. Jesus fought a terrible battle on the cross but his suffering brought about victory over sin and evil. Our sins were washed away, our relationship with our loving God restored. Jesus is the second person of the Trinity; both God and man hung on the cross for us. He died and he was raised from the dead. Paul makes the resurrection centrality of his teaching. This is just one example, 1 Corinthians 15 'If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.'

Paul's audience would have known all about Crucifixion and maybe even witnessed it in all its evil. Modern films or productions can come nowhere near. I did once hear a lecture on the Turin shroud and the couple who gave it had a full sized facsimile. Now whether this really is the burial cloth of Christ is not the point here. The point is that the photographs show clearly the imprint of a crucified man. We have learned a great deal about crucifixion from it. It reduced me to tears so I can only imagine the horrors of the reality. The truth is that Jesus Christ, our God and our King, did that in love for humanity.

Now on Easter Morning we have the account of the resurrection, Jesus is human and divine, he is raised from the dead as he said he would be. Death has no dominion over him or us anymore. The story of the resurrection is wonderful, but it is so human, a factual account. In the very first sentence we have the earth shattering news, at first misinterpreted by Mary.

^{20.1} '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.'

Mary Magdalene is mentioned twelve times in the gospels; far more than many of the apostles or Jesus' own family. There is absolutely no evidence that she was a prostitute or 'sinner', that was due to confusion with the woman who poured perfume on Jesus' feet. In John of course this was Mary the sister of Lazarus. The gospel of Luke tells us,

^{8.1} 'Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, ²as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out,' Whether this was exorcism or that Jesus had cured her of a disability like epilepsy we will never know. What is sure is that she was a loyal follower of Jesus and ministered to him. Now she comes to the tomb in the early light of Sunday morning. It was a brave thing to do. Because of the rumours that Jesus had said he would rise from the dead, the tomb had been sealed and there would have been guards to make sure nobody could remove the body. Mary simply wishes to do the last thing she can for Jesus, anoint his body. First she must encounter surly guards, but no, what she finds is no stone and no guards. More astonishing still is the fact that there is no body. She thinks it has been taken. Her first instinct is to run to the disciples, she brings the news and it is of course Peter who rushes to the tomb with John, the disciple Jesus loved. The detail provided by John is itself amazing.

^{20.2} '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.'

³ Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went towards the tomb. ⁴The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first.'

This is a typical example of the oral tradition. The details are so exact; we can imagine the account being carefully passed down, the details remaining constant. As yet it could simply mean, as Mary supposes, the body of Jesus has been removed. As the disciples look into the tomb again what they see is specific,

⁵ 'He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷ and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself.'

Notice how John hovers by the entrance and it is Peter the man of action, the impulsive one, who goes inside. I think this account is so very realistic, so true to the characteristics of each of them.

What happens next I have always found strange,

⁸'Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; ⁹for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ¹⁰Then the disciples returned to their homes.'

They returned home! I can't imagine that after finding the tomb empty they would just accept it at face value and go. The fact that they did is again showing St. John's adherence to fact. Something is ambiguous too. We are told that the beloved disciple, 'saw and believed' just what did he believe, that Jesus had risen? If so why the last sentence ⁹ 'for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead.' It seems he simply thought, like Peter and Mary, that the body had been taken. So the men leave but Mary does not.

Her loyalty, her love keeps her as near to her Lord as she can be. It is a remarkable fact that Jesus chooses a woman to be the first person to witness the resurrection. Remember that a woman could not give evidence in court then. It is worth pausing here to think of Mary's state of mind. She has lost her Lord, brutally killed on a cross. Now they have even stolen the body. She is in the depths of misery. She must feel as if her world has collapsed and her very identity has been shattered, the focus of her life and faith has been torn away. The next words, like the verse, 'Jesus wept,' are very short phrases but for Mary they express utter misery. I suppose it is simply instinct that leads her to look once more into the tomb. What she sees is earth shattering, supernatural, yet told with simple quiet dignity.

¹² '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. ¹³They 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.'

Instead of a gaping empty tomb we have two beings all in white who ask a simple question.

Suddenly some instinct makes her turn,

¹⁴ 'When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵Jesus 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.'

It is strange that she did not recognise him. It has led to much speculation, is Jesus' resurrection body different in appearance? Or was it simply that the light source was behind him and so the

figure was a silhouette in the early light. We will never know, the point is Mary just thinks in rational terms, she is still unaware of the earth shattering event she is living through. One word changes it all and the scales fall from her eyes.

¹⁶ Jesus said to her, 'Mary!'

This always reminds me of Isaiah 43.1,

'Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;

I have called you by name, you are mine.'

Mary's world is turned around as she hears her name. Her Identity is restored, tears of misery turn to joy and she replies,

¹⁶ 'She turned and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabbouni!' (which means Teacher).'

It is vital that we see there is no question mark here. Mary sees Jesus, her risen Lord and her God.

This is the whole centre of the Christian faith. Jesus Christ died for us and rose again on the third day. Many people have given their lives for others, only one has risen from the dead, Jesus Christ, fully human and divine. Jesus' instruction is simple, not bring the disciples here, but you go and tell them.

¹⁷ '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." ' ¹⁸ 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.'

So Mary Magdalene becomes the apostle to the apostles; she brings the greatest news of all time. 'I have seen the Lord.' What faith, what love, she is an example to us all. It is wonderful to just sit still and imagine you are with Mary witnessing the event which God had planned from the beginning. Last year I celebrated Easter Holy Communion at Spital Chapel and suddenly at the beginning of the service the sun's rays burst through the east window in beams of light and shone on the Easter garden and the empty tomb throughout the service. It was a special and symbolic event. Easter Day is the most important of the Christian year, for without the resurrection our faith would be in vain, But as St. Paul says,

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.'

And so we have eternal life through him, our faith is that we will be united with him after death and in God's time will be a part of his recreated order on earth.

In times of darkness, sadness or misery in our lives we can stand alongside Mary and we can hear Jesus call our name. He is with us always and it is Jesus who can strengthen and renew. Jesus is alive now and forever and he turns lives around now just as surely as he did for Mary two thousand years ago. At Pentecost he sent the Holy Spirit to those first followers gathered in the upper room. The Holy Spirit is with everyone who professes the name of Jesus.

If we want to see the power of the Holy Spirit at work in his first followers we have to look no further than the acts of the Apostle. Strangely I had never read Acts all through but during lockdown I did so almost at a sitting. What a wonderful book it is, absolutely stunning. Just think of Peter on, what we now call, Maundy Thursday. Think of the denial of Jesus, the terror which causes his faltering, cowardly, (though understandable) behaviour. Peter had said he was ready to die with Jesus, But Jesus knew the truth, 'Before the cock crows you will have denied me three times' So it is and Peter weeps when Jesus turns to look at him. Even after seeing Jesus in the upper room on the eve of the resurrection he still has no direction and says, 'I am going fishing.' The meeting with Jesus

on the shore restores him and he receives his commission. It is at Pentecost that the Holy Spirit fills the room and each one of them. They are strengthened and transformed. Just look at Peter now in our reading from Acts. He is, as Jesus said he would be, the leader of the apostles.

The reading is sadly taken out of context but the context is vitally important.

^{10.1} 'In Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Cohort, as it was called. ²He was a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God.'

Cornelius is an officer in the Roman army of occupation and a Gentile, two very good reasons that the Jews would have nothing to do with him. Yet he is unusual in that he is a God fearing man. He receives a vision the detail is very specific,

'Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. ⁵Now send men to Joppa for a certain Simon who is called Peter; ⁶he is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the seaside.'

So he sends messengers, meanwhile Peter who is praying receives a vision, he sees something like a sailcloth containing all sorts of creatures that the Jews would have deemed unclean. He is told to kill and eat.

¹⁴But Peter said, 'By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.'

¹⁵The voice said to him again, a second time, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.'

¹⁶ This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven.

Peter has lessons to learn, he must obey God and God's way is not according to strict Jewish ways now. Jesus Christ brought in the new way; he has opened the door for everyone who turns to him. Peter is told to go with the messengers from Cornelius so this time he obeys God at once. When he arrives at his house Cornelius has gathered friends and family and is ready to worship Peter but Peter admonishes him, only Christ is Lord. What he says next is vital for us,

²⁸ 'You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean. ²⁹ So when I was sent for, I came without objection. Now may I ask why you sent for me?'

God has said all are one, none is less than the other, and we are all loved equally by God. Race, status, class, it matters not. All that is necessary is to believe in Jesus and live in his way.

It is the household of Cornelius that Peter is speaking to in our passage for this morning. This is the landmark announcement.

³⁴ 'Then Peter began to speak to them: 'I truly understand that God shows no partiality, ³⁵but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.'

Peter reiterates to them Jesus' life and witness throughout the Holy Land and he says we know this because we were with him every step of the way. Yes he was a great man and a great teacher but that is not the whole of it. The cross and resurrection are at the centre.

'They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; ⁴⁰ but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, ⁴¹ 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.'

The resurrection means Jesus is Lord and God, he is alive and they are witnesses of the resurrection because they spent time with him. Jesus has ascended to his Father but his followers received his commission to carry on his work to take the good news to all people. Peter has learned now that Jesus is for all people.

⁴² '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. ⁴³ All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.'

All believers who try to live in his way receive all the 'benefits of his passion' and resurrection. We are all brothers and sisters of Jesus and coheirs with him.

This central teaching is given to Cornelius and his household, people who the Jews would have deemed beyond the pale. Peter has obeyed God and the gate is opened for all. Strangely the reading ends at verse 43. But verse 44 is most splendid of all.

⁴⁴ 'While Peter was still speaking; the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word.'

Peter has told them that God has spoken in the vision and said they are welcome, but now God acts, and as confirmation his Holy Spirit descends on the whole gathering! What wonderful affirmation.

We are all one in Christ as St. John says in chapter 3,

¹⁶ '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.

¹⁷ 'Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.'

I wish you all a peaceful and blessed Easter.

'Jesus Christ is risen today, alleluia! our triumphant holy day.'

~~~~~