

Sermon for Sunday 31 March 2024 – Easter Day

Revd Graham Naylor, Curate

Acts 10.34-43; Psalm 118.14-24; 1 Corinthians 15.1-11; Mark 16.1-8

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Please do be seated.

This may be rather appropriate on Easter Sunday here in a church dedicated to St Peter and St Paul, that we heard in the reading from Acts and from 1 Corinthians, summaries by Peter and Paul of their eyewitness encounter with Jesus and their summaries of the gospel. They were able to say that on the third day, Jesus was raised from the dead according to the scriptures.

But let's go back a bit. Let's go back to the evening when Jesus was crucified. Crucifixion, that barbaric humiliating form of death, which didn't fit with the Jewish thinking of Messiah, God's chosen one. There was not a concept of what we would now call 'The suffering servant' that we read of in Isaiah. As Jesus hung on the tree, women who had supported him through his ministry in Galilee, and had come to Jerusalem, are watching on, looking as Jesus hung suffering, and then died. And Joseph of Arimathea asks Pilate for Jesus's body to bury it, so that the body wouldn't be left up during the Jewish Passover.

Joseph was a wealthy man. He was also a member of the Sanhedrin, the Ruling Council. He obviously had influence because he gained an interview, an audience, with Pilate to ask for Jesus's body. And Pilate has first checked twice that Jesus is dead. It wasn't unheard of for families to come and ask for the body of their loved one and take it down before before they'd actually died, so that their loved one could escape the brutality of death and capital punishment. But Jesus had died, and the women are looking on. John's gospel tells us that Nicodemus joined Joseph; they took the body of Jesus to the tomb; they prepared him for burial. John's gospel tells us that Nicodemus had brought 75 pounds in weight of expensive myrrh and aloe. That was an extravagant gesture of honour to Jesus. And the women see what has been done. They see Joseph and Nicodemus take the body of and put it into the tomb and roll a stone in front.

Now, the women then go and buy spices at the end of the Sabbath, probably in the evening, when trading can recommence, because they too want to anoint Jesus's body. I wonder whether they thought amongst themselves, and talked amongst themselves, and said, 'Oh, look at those men. They just can't do it right. We're going to have to go tomorrow morning. We're going to have to just do it properly for our Jesus.' Wanting to express their devotion, now in death, as they had supported Jesus during his lifetime. They go and buy the spices, they go go back, I presume, to a house together. Those hours must have dragged because they are in mourning. They're grieving; they've just seen Jesus die a cruel and painful death. The range of emotions must have been incredible. Of grief, of anger, of shock, numbness, anger, fear.

The male disciples were no help. They'd gone and locked themselves in an upper room to keep out of the way of the Jewish leaders. They believe that they were maybe next for the execution as followers of a

failed messianic leader. Remember, they had no thought of resurrection, despite what Jesus had been telling them during his ministry in Galilee. No thought of resurrection because death is final. Then early on the first day of the week, they go to the tomb. They have no expectation of finding an empty tomb. They're going to lovingly anoint the body of Jesus. The hours have dragged on.

They may be looking out, trying to see the first glimpse of daylight when they can go. I wonder if the conversation went something like this. 'Mary, you awake?' 'Yes, Mary.' 'I think I see a little glow of light on the horizon. Do you?' 'Maybe a little bit.' 'That's good enough for me. Let's go. Let's head to the tomb.' And they leave. And they're carrying the spices. And I wonder if the conversation continues, 'Mary, what on earth are you doing?' 'What do you mean, what am I doing?' 'What are you doing carrying that lump of timber?' 'Well, you saw Joseph and Nicodemus put that heavy stone in front of the tomb, and they're not around to help us. They're locked away. I thought maybe somehow we'd get a little stone, the timber, we'd lever the... we'd use it as a fulcrum. I don't know. I've not thought about these practical things, but we'll find a way.' They still don't expect an open and empty tomb because they saw Joseph and Nicodemus roll a stone and seal the dead body of Jesus in the tomb.

But they arrived to find the stone is already rolled back. Mark's description isn't as elaborate as Matthew's; there's no earthquake; just a matter of fact, the stone had already been rolled back. The women go into the tomb. They probably still expected to find a body. Instead, they find a young man. Other accounts tell us it was an angel, sitting in the tomb, and he speaks to them. Imagine the women talking about their experience afterwards. 'Mary?' 'Yes, Mary?' 'Now, I know last night we were cooped up in your house with all the spices, and I might be a little a bit light-headed, but I thought maybe I saw an angel.' 'Oh, thank goodness. You saw him, too. And did he say something like, Jesus has been raised?' 'Yeah, that's what I thought I heard him say. And did I hear him say we should tell the disciples, including Peter?' 'Yeah, that's what I heard, too.' They're left, maybe a better translation is to say they were left shaking and astonished; terror implies fear, and the Greek language doesn't say that.

He is raised. We're to tell the disciples, including Peter. A lovely inclusion. I can imagine them maybe not wanting to tell Peter if they'd heard that he denied Jesus. But the angel singles out Peter amongst the other disciples. Mark tells us the women said nothing to anyone. The longer endings accurately summarise the other gospel accounts where they didn't keep quiet for very long, they went back, Peter and John rushed to the tomb, they also realised the tomb is empty. Jesus has been raised from the dead.

The human experience of the finality and irreversibility of death has been overturned. The women and the disciples concept of a Saviour, not being somebody who would suffer or die a shameful death, has been completely transformed. Because if this story had ended with a body in the tomb, that would have been the end. Jesus would have simply been another foolish pretender messianic figure who'd come into conflict with the Romans and the Jewish leaders, and paid the price for his recklessness. But the empty tomb and God raising Jesus from the dead means that nothing would ever be the same again. It's because of the death and resurrection, testified by multiple eyewitness accounts that means that Peter can say to Cornelius, and that Paul can write to the Corinthians, that the prophets and the scriptures

pointed to Jesus as the person who, through his death and resurrection, can forgive sin, and put humankind back in right relationship with God.

Jesus died for our sins, the brokenness of humankind, and God raised him to life on the third day. Mark began his gospel saying, 'This is the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.' The good news is that there is forgiveness of sins, there is restoration, there is wholeness available to those who choose to believe in Jesus, the resurrected Son of God. The question I leave you with this morning is how will you respond to that good news of an empty tomb and the risen Jesus?

Amen.