

Sermon, St Andrew's
Easter: 1 Corinthians 15.1-11, John 20.1-18

*Alleluia, Christ is risen! **He is risen indeed, Alleluia!***

*May I speak in our Easter dawn, to our Easter hope, with our Easter joy, and in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. **Amen.***

"Then cometh Mary Magdalene in the morning early"...

So begins the greatest day of our faith, "while it was yet dark"...

I would normally seek to set out some semblance of sermon structure, but today I deliberately just begin with that hopeless setting out in the dark, as that's where many of us may have been, and perhaps even still are, in our feelings about death, and what comes after it.

Mary, of course, is not setting out in hope - she is going to cry at her healer's tomb - perhaps to help embalm the body: to do for her friend what is right according to the law (thinking of that phrase we have heard a few months ago, when His parents bring Christ to the Temple). I remember a chaplain friend speaking of her care for a shocking double loss, of a mother (whom I knew) and her baby (who I never met) - following the steps of what God's law says is right, when you can do nothing else, when love has become the blindness of shock and grief - that is where Mary starts today.

Many of us can be at different "stages" of grief about those we love but see no longer: one source of conflict around funerals is often that everyone is in a different state of shock, or anger, or denial, or acceptance, from everyone else - yet may not realise that. And that is where the disciples, Christ's friends and family, start today - the end has come very quick, in the week from Palm Sunday...

And Mary's grief then meets a new, horrible shock - the empty tomb. How might we feel if it was the fresh grave of our friend - or our partner, parent, or even child? What new horror is this, when the pain of loss is still so raw? (CS Lewis' *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* depicts this awful moment well.) Mary's initial response is understandably not one of hope, and certainly not joy, but of further great distress. The Vicar of that mother and baby I've mentioned preached one Easter on the empty tomb, nothing more, and it was a starkly funereal sermon - but that Vicar had taken 200 funerals in their first year of ministry, and was "a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief".

But Mary's shock and grief now meet these incomprehensible glimmerings of something utterly different, of hope beyond despair (a constant theme through the Gospels is the disciples' forgetting or misunderstanding much of what He promised - perhaps like us).

Mahler's "Resurrection" symphony contains a beautiful section of "*Urlicht*" - first, primeval light: and this now literally *dawns* here.

Christ's speaking her name is the good news on which the whole world now turns from darkness into light, and changes. Our High Altar shows *Christus Victor*, Christ conquering death - but the Gospel accounts capture the *range* of experiences of death and Resurrection, from the deep moving of the stone, to this quiet moment of incredible joy in the garden. The garden of despair has become the garden of rest, and now the garden of hope.

The disciples' range of responses mirror their earlier responses to Christ's Crucifixion ("through a glass darkly") - of anger, denial, incomprehension, and dawning realisation - but in reverse, from despair to joy. The Resurrection good news is, like Good Friday, not only a single transformative moment, but a spiritual journey on

which we continue to change, and move through different stages. Our perspective on life and death can be completely changed by Easter - if we let them. Shakespeare said “our little life is rounded with a sleep” - but now death is rounded by life. The pre-Christian vision here, when the church before *this* one was built, was of a sparrow flying from winter darkness thro a lit hall (“life”) back out into darkness again: but death is set in the context of life now, surrounded by it.

Easter is, in England, such a festival of spring - and the great funeral reading, 1 Corinthians 15, roots and grounds our future transformation in the simple sign of sowing seed. (I see on the news that the deceased Zulu king is not “buried” but *planted*.) This is my first Easter since my mother’s death, and I allow myself to think that, when we meet again, it will be in an English spring - not in the cloud, but standing on the earth, as Job wrote, in her favourite music, which my wife recorded for her funeral: *I know that my Redeemer liveth*. I listened to *Messiah* on a prospective “end of life” visit to my mother’s brother before Christmas, and had to pull off the A1 when “I know...” was sung - the journey of grief and joy goes on changing us, from darkness into light.

At Easter we have a foretaste of the general Resurrection, Christ “the firstfruits of them that sleep”. When I’ve sung on this morning, I’ve encouraged colleagues to lift our heads from our hymn books and project, in procession, our voices down the north aisle, to reach every body buried in this church and church yard, even the furthest burial up by Gallowgate, to proclaim again the good news they all were buried here to hear, the hope in which they rest. Philip Larkin is rarely seen as a poet of Resurrection, yet even he writes of “a sheet of light that paves the palaces of sight, and brings again the

river shining through the field of graves... lineage of joy...
wingspans go across and over our heads... flying to the ebb of
dark... making sorrow seem a spider busy on a forgotten web.
They are calling every fibre of the world into rejoicing, a mile-long
silken cloth of wings moving lightwards out of death".
That is my vision for our church and us all this morning - of the
place of each of us in that long line of life and love, Christ our Head,
the masthead light by which we steer, the Lamb and flag in our east
window.

We are called to live as though dead to sin, and to life before Christ;
to leave all that falls short of this love behind in His tomb. Before
His birth, the Bible wrote of love as strong as death - but here we
find that love is stronger: that the lives of those we have "lost" are,
in my wife's words, "surrounded by that greater love". We are called
to live life in the light of eternity, in the light of this Easter morning,
an onward journey of hope - and I hardly need mention the parallels
with our long, slow slog out of "lock down"! Mahler's Resurrection
symphony finishes with the words "*bereite dich zu leben*" - prepare
to *live*.

Many sing "Thine be the glory" today - and we sang it at the awful
double funeral of that mother and baby I mentioned. I confess I
can't yet sing "death hath lost its sting" - for me, it's not true yet, but
St Paul assures us it will be true one day. Today we don't sing of
Resurrection complete, finished for us all, but of dawn, of journey
and of hope. *The light shined in the darkness - and the darkness
comprehended it not.*

*In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost,
AMEN.*

Written on Mothering Sunday