

SERMON FOR EASTER SUNDAY: 31 MARCH 2024 AT STAPLEFORD (based on Acts 10:34-43 and Mark 16:1-8)

The Resurrection witnesses - seeing is believing!

Often, the incomprehensible or unexpected become clear once we look back. It's as if the final pieces of a jigsaw puzzle at last reveal the full picture. Looking at today's Gospel reading with that in mind helps us better to understand the women's immediate reactions to the empty tomb. A strong motif running through Mark's writing is that of Christ's identity being a badly-kept secret. How paradoxical that at the point where the secret of his divinity is fully revealed, it's not exactly embraced with joy. Mark's version of the tomb scene is condensed and somewhat terse, when compared with those of the other Gospel writers. And Mark's is not so much a resurrection story as one about an empty tomb. Compare this with the reading from Acts, which takes us beyond initial response to the impact. Here we encounter Peter, who has come at last to understand. But I mustn't get ahead of myself.

Taking the Gospel passage first – a few of Jesus' women friends set off before dawn to anoint Christ's dead body. It is these women who are the first to receive the astounding news that Jesus has been raised. They were understandably alarmed to find not a body, but a man in white, whom we take to be an angel. He repeats Jesus' words earlier to the disciples about his rising from death and meeting them in Galilee. We do not know if these women were even among the disciples who had been told by Jesus in Chapter 14: "But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee". So it would be unfair to judge the fear and perhaps incredulity that Mary Magdalene and the others felt. After all, it is often said that there are only two things we can be certain of during this life on earth - death and taxes. Jesus' death was not what they had hoped for, or expected – but it had been, as far as they were concerned, pretty final.

That may explain why they disobeyed the angel's command to go and tell Peter and the rest of the disciples. In Luke's Gospel, the women did believe. Furthermore, we recall earlier situations where people, who had been healed for example, were told not to say anything, but often did the exact opposite. These women are too stunned to pass on the message. In Mark, fear contrasts with faith, and the women's failure to do as the angel asked is part of a pattern of divine command and human failing. We remember Peter's denials and the disciples fleeing from the trial and crucifixion. The passage we have heard today was probably how Mark's Gospel originally ended - with the enigma of the missing body and the reminder of Christ's promise that he would see the disciples in Galilee. Not a very satisfactory ending I feel - and I suspect later editors felt the same, so they added more to ensure we should be in no doubt that Jesus did reappear.

And how different things might have been if he had not reappeared after his crucifixion and disappearance from the tomb. Yes, we'd have had the Last Supper, with his farewell speech to remember a wonderful teacher and a man who had performed miracles; a man put to death in the place of a murderer. But with no post-crucifixion appearances, there would have been no witnesses to his resurrection - no one to pass on what they had seen and believed. The disciples would not have been forgiven nor their relationship with Jesus restored. Would Acts or Paul's letters have been written? They tell us of how the good news of Christ's resurrection was spread by those whose lives had been transformed by their witness to, and belief in, that resurrection. So today's passage from Acts augments the Gospel reading, taking us beyond fear to faith. It shows Peter, transformed through his witness to the risen Christ, and spreading the word.

This Peter is a far cry from the fearful coward who denied Jesus three times. We last heard of him weeping over that betrayal, with every reason to believe that that was how his relationship with Jesus would end – unreconciled and racked with guilt. But Peter is given a chance to start again. By the time we hear of him in Acts, we can assume that he did see the risen Jesus in Galilee. In our reading, Peter is at the house of the Roman soldier Cornelius, a Gentile, normally considered unclean and off limits. There Peter talks of God as truly impartial, and of the risen Jesus as Lord of all, Jews and Gentiles alike. Peter knows that he has been called to preach the message that “everyone who believes in Jesus receives forgiveness of sins through his name”. Faith in Christ offers a new start. Jesus had entrusted his gospel to Peter and the friends who had abandoned him at the cross. They had experienced the depths of disappointment, dashed hopes, doubt and fear – so they were absolutely the right people to preach about forgiveness and new beginnings.

Faith, fear and doubt are closely interwoven, for faith is not knowledge, but the conviction of things not seen. Some may find Christ's resurrection nothing short of incredible, but Christians are inspired to hope and believe it is true by its impact on those who were called to bear witness. And this Easter, as the pieces of the puzzle once again fall into place, it is no less surprising, life-changing and meaningful. Familiarity with the event, as we revisit it each year and reflect on it at every Eucharist, should not inure us to its messages of hope, new starts, forgiveness and transformation. Christ's death was not the end of the story, for the reverberations of his resurrection continue to be felt in every life that is touched by those words “he has been raised”.

I'm going to let C. S. Lewis have the last word here as he describes what faith meant for him. “I believe in Christianity as I believe the sun has risen, not only because I see it, but because by it, I see everything else”.