

**SERMON FOR EASTER SUNDAY: 10TH APRIL 2023 AT STAPLEFORD
(based on Matt.28:1-10)**

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O God our strength and our Redeemer. Amen

Matthew's version of Christ's resurrection is subtly different from those of the other Gospel writers. They read like a tale of the unexpected, one where the characters react with great surprise, incredulity or doubt to the news that Christ has risen from the dead. On the other hand, Matthew's telling of the story strikes me as one of anticipation, a muted expectation that develops into understanding, with elements of "I told you so" and a sprinkling of irony.

Let's first of all ponder those words 'expectation' and 'surprise'. Easter Day, for us, is the most joyous day of the year. What might be the various expectations of other people today, around the country or even here in Stapleford? Some possibly woke up thinking, "we've got the mother-in-law coming today - better get the lamb on". Young children will be expecting to be surprised by lots of Easter eggs, their parents meanwhile working out strategies for controlled gorging of the chocolate delights. And if our imaginations take us to the manufacturers of said chocolate, well their minds might simply be on their sales targets! As well as arguments over who has found the most, the tradition of hunting for eggs does at least generate surprise and joy - feelings akin to those we experience on the third day after Christ's death. Many of the people of Jerusalem, however, when they awoke on that day, will have felt sadness and regret - a good man's life come to an end. They may have thought, "well, that's that - all his predictions have come to nothing - never did understand what that was all about". How wrong they were!

But what about the two Marys in our story - I think it is possible to discern a slight difference in their expectations and reactions from those of many others

in Jerusalem. And certainly different from those of the women in Mark's version, coming to anoint a dead body, but fleeing in terror from the empty tomb and too afraid to tell anyone. Likewise the women in Luke's Gospel - they too came to anoint the body and were perplexed to find it missing, but at least they remembered Jesus' predictions about rising on the third day and brought the angel's message of Christ's resurrection back to the apostles - mind you, only to be met with disbelief. And the Mary Magdalene depicted in John's account initially thinks that a grave robber has stolen the body. The women in all three versions anticipate finding a dead body.

No doubt the two women in Matthew had the same expectation, and yet they seem to take the events that follow a bit more in their stride. According to the end of the previous chapter, they "had followed Jesus from Galilee and provided for him", but otherwise had been fairly low profile and silent in the Gospel. Even now, we never actually hear their voices - the emphasis is on what they do and how they react. And I don't sense overwhelming surprise in the women. They have been part of the whole journey to the cross, watching the crucifixion from afar. It is now dawn on the first day of the week, and they arrive, not with spices to anoint the dead body of Jesus, but to see the tomb. 'Seeing' in Matthew is used not only in the context of perceiving visually, but also that of gaining insight and understanding. I wonder what's in their minds as they approach the tomb. Having followed Jesus from Galilee and "provided" for him, they have surely also heard him say that he will die and be raised on the third day. And we note that at the appearance of the angel, it is the guards who "shook and became like dead men", not the women. There is no small amount of irony in this: the living become as the dead, while he who has died will be revealed to be living. Unlike the guards, however, the women do not faint with fear.

On that basis, we might wonder why the angel asked the women not to be

afraid. Well, God's 'Good News' messages are regularly preceded in the Bible by the words "do not be afraid". We just have to think of the birth narrative, when the angel visited Elizabeth, Mary, the shepherds, and Joseph. But the angel in today's story really knows how to make an entrance! He appears with a flourish, accompanied by an earthquake and in clothes as bright as lightning. One can almost picture this magnificent angel, as he whips away the huge stone, before sitting on it, maybe crossing his arms and looking with disdain on the fainted guards, and then turning to address the two women. He is of course God's messenger, come to tell them that Jesus, who was crucified, has been raised, just as Jesus said he would be. Matthew wants to make sure we notice these three little words, "as he said." Because in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus 'told you so' three times. He tried hard to deliver to the disciples the good news of his rising again after three days, but they failed to see, to understand that part of the message.

I suspect that the women had got the message, though - hence their reaction to it being one of awe and joy, rather than shock and incredulity. But there is an element of surprise, and it comes as they rush off to do the angel's bidding and tell the disciples - they hurtle into Jesus himself. Probably not quite what they had anticipated, especially after the angel's dramatic appearance and having been told to expect him in Galilee. Instead, here he is before them, somewhat incongruously uttering as his first words "greetings!", as if his reappearance after death was the most natural thing in the world. No dramatic re-entry into their lives, just a reiteration of the angel's words. Some surprises do not have to be searched for like Easter eggs; nor do they necessarily come in glittering packages.

The women come to the tomb to see, searching for understanding - and now they know. Where will you find the risen Christ today? I leave the searching to you - you may come across him in surprising places, but I don't think you

will have to hunt very far.

In the name of Christ, amen.





