

Easter Day – 2020 (Mt 28:1-10)

Of all natural materials I love wood the best, and so this old folk tale has always spoken to me in a profound way – it goes like this: there were three trees growing together in a forest dreaming about what they'll be when they are fully mature and cut down for timber. The first tree dreams that it will be made into the finest treasure chest in the whole world and hold the most beautiful riches; the second that it will be the world's strongest ship; and the third that it will become the loftiest tree in the whole wide world and become the tallest spire, pointing people to God. When each was hewn and they were made into a humble feed box for animals; a modest fishing boat; and left as a forgotten beam in a timber-yard, the trees wondered what had gone amiss with their dreams. However when they became the manger in the stable at Jesus' birth; the boat used by Jesus to still the storm; and the beam upon which Jesus hung on the cross; they came to recognise what they hadn't seen before – that Jesus' presence changes everything.

After Jesus' crucifixion, when Jesus was no longer with them, the disciples and Jesus' family despaired and couldn't believe what had just happened. It had after all been a roller-coaster of emotions during that very first Holy Week, and their feelings must have gone up and down like yo-yos. First they had been carried along by the cheering crowds at Jesus's entry into Jerusalem – the Palm Sunday story we heard about last Sunday. They had all experienced the intimacy of eating and drinking with Jesus and one another at the Passover supper – Jesus's 'Last Supper' as we now call it; and then the fear, the shame, the despair and the grief of Jesus's arrest, trial and horrific death. And they were scared that perhaps the authorities would come after them also. Would they be arrested also and put to death simply for being His followers? So they huddle together locked in an upstairs room in abject misery.

But then two women both called Mary go early in the morning to the tomb in which they laid Jesus' body. They know that it's been secured by a huge stone and guarded by soldiers. They go to grieve – probably to cry. The one for whom they had sacrificed so much had been taken from them. All their bright hopes for him had come to nothing. What should they do now? It was a very black, dark and troubling time.

Nothing though could have prepared them for what happened next. Now none of the Gospel writers attempt to tell us what happened to Jesus

between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. That remains a mystery. Instead they show us the effect of the resurrection on those who were there. And interestingly each of them tells the story of the resurrection in a distinctive, different way, but for me Matthew's is the most graphic. Matthew writes of an earthquake caused by an angel of the Lord whose appearance was like lightning and clothes as white as snow, coming from heaven, rolling back the stone of the tomb, and sitting on it. His message to the women changes everything. It is simple – Jesus is not here – He has been raised as He had said He would be – go and tell the disciples.

No wonder the guards shook and became as dead men; little wonder that the women are filled with fear, together with great joy, especially after their further encounter with their risen Lord. For once again Jesus manages to turn everything upside down in their lives - of course they were filled with fear together with joy. For they had learnt just like the trees in the folk-tale that Jesus' resurrection – His presence - changes everything.

What happened next to the two Marys? We don't know. We hear practically nothing more about them in the whole NT. But it's probably safe to say that their future lives were dominated by Jesus' appearance to them on that first Easter day and his command to them to 'Go and tell'. In fact many writers over the centuries since have argued that the very fact that the church has survived at all shows the truth of the resurrection. How could this frightened bunch of Jesus' disciples have ever launched the Christian church and been prepared to give up their own lives for Jesus, if they hadn't been completely fired-up by their own personal experience of Jesus' resurrection triggered by this account of the empty tomb?

Perhaps though if it was to be taken on its own the fact of the tomb being empty *by itself* doesn't constitute strong enough evidence of the resurrection; but of course this story doesn't stand alone. For over the next few weeks we will hear the stories of the appearances of Jesus to the disciples, which changed them from that dishevelled forsaken band without purpose, into a disciplined and organised group of men and women who were willing to go out and spread the good news of Jesus' resurrection, and be prepared to back it up through giving up their own lives in order to witness to Him and his instruction to the two Marys to 'Go and tell'.

But perhaps even more important than the Biblical witness to the resurrection is our own experience of Jesus' presence with *us*. For is not the case that even in our own disbelieving generation, it might be the words of the Gospel; or of a prayer; or something that someone says to us; or a line of poetry; or a piece of music; or even perhaps a phrase in a sermon - that hits US, reminding us of the truth of the resurrection and that Christ is alive here and now? Is it not the case that in any number of ways Christians are aware of Christ's presence amongst them? And at the end of the day it is our own experience confirming the ancient testimonies that give us the confidence to affirm that Christ is risen, and this changes everything.

All this tells us something of God. The resurrection of Jesus Christ means that God can always bring forth the new. He can transform any human situation however hopeless it seems. For whereas the cross of Christ speaks of God standing alongside us in the flux of events; the resurrection speaks to us of God always ahead of events, and is thus the great ground of hope for our world. Our world might seem a very bleak place this Easter but the truth is that when we are at our lowest ebb God through Jesus stands the best chance to come alongside us and transform our lives for the better, turning them around and bringing us new hope and meaning. Indeed all the symbols of Easter point to this truth

- The egg is not just a shell but contains the potential for new life – the chick
- The chrysalis looks dead but becomes an amazing butterfly
- The peacock is no longer drab but reveals the full technicolour glory of his tail- feathers
- The cross no longer has Jesus upon it – He's gone – he's risen

So let's celebrate this Easter Day and allow our risen Lord to turn our fearful hearts at this time to ones of quiet confidence and hope believing that because of His resurrection Jesus can transform any situation however hopeless it seems. His resurrection has indeed changed everything for the better – we might be fearful but we should also remember the two Marys' joy. Alleluia!