

Sunday 9 April 2023
Holy Trinity – Holy Communion (8.00am)
Easter Day

Acts 10:34-43
John 20:1-18

If you ask most people outside of a church community what they think is the biggest, most important day of the year for Christians, they will probably say "Christmas". That's what our society has achieved: a romantic mid-winter festival from which most of the things that really matter - the danger, the politics - have been carefully excluded.

The true answer is, of course, Easter Day.

If it hadn't been for Easter, nobody would ever have dreamed of celebrating Christmas. If it hadn't been for Easter, Christmas would have been irrelevant.

So, on this day of days, we have heard just a part of John's Gospel account of what happened on that first Easter Day.

Mary Magdalene doesn't feature in John's Gospel until her appearance, with the other Marys at the foot of the cross. John has told us nothing of her history; the little we do know, comes from the other three Gospels. But her place here is spectacular. She is the first apostle, the apostle to the apostles. The first to bring the news that the tomb was empty. And, towards the end of our passage, the greatest privilege yet, the first to see, to meet, to speak with the risen Lord himself.

You can, if you like, think of any number of reasons why Mary doesn't immediately recognise Jesus as he stands in front of her in the garden. She's obviously in a terrible state, her eyes are full of tears, and her imagination full of macabre visions of death and grave robbers. She is utterly single minded in her search for the dead body of her Lord. So single minded to the point where even a meeting with a pair of angels becomes uninteresting unless they can give her the one piece of information she wants. For the moment though, the empty tomb is just another twist of the knife. It is dark, all is chaos; someone must have taken him away. The grave clothes, which John had been careful to tell us in the previous chapter were wrapped tightly around Jesus' body, are discarded. Confusion reigns.

She runs back into the city; back to Peter in his hiding place and the young disciple Jesus specially loves. They then run too, back to the tomb and the young man gets there first. Peter piles in with him and, indeed, the tomb is empty with the grave clothes just lying there.

It seems that what Mary, Peter and John have come up against is an absence, an emptiness. They don't know where Jesus is. Jesus is simply not there. You can imagine that Mary and the others would have spent the Saturday Sabbath numb with grief.

They would have still been in shock, the events of that first Good Friday moving as quickly as they did. They would have been exhausted, physically, mentally and emotionally.

John doesn't mention the men seeing any angels - maybe they weren't there at that point. We are just told that the men believed and returned to their homes. It feels like the men have let Jesus down... again! They deserted him at his arrest; they were, by and large, absent at the foot of the cross and here they have scuttled off to the comparative safety of their home.

All of which leaves Mary as the principal character and, for me, that confirms the authenticity of this account. If someone in the first century had wanted to invent a story about people seeing Jesus, they wouldn't have dreamed of giving the star part to a woman. Let alone Mary Magdalene. She was a woman who had lost her way through life and then found calm and purpose when she followed Jesus. She was a forgiven sinner. She was a person who, on that Sunday morning, was demoralised and in distress. And she was someone whose evidence had every likelihood of being dismissed in the male dominated culture of the day.

So when we, like Mary, find ourselves in a dark place, emotionally and physically shattered, sometimes all we might come up against is that feeling of absence. It seems as if God is no longer with us. It takes determination to hang on in there, to live with the questions, to dwell in the emptiness of Easter Eve, trusting that like the first Easter morning eventually the darkness will recede and a new dawn will break. Because Jesus always meets us where we are. Jesus doesn't wait for our lives to be fine-tuned or for the world's injustices to be put right. Instead, Jesus summons us to share this day with him, in all its promise and possibility. It's all too easy to sit in church, effectively clinging to Jesus' feet. But we're commanded by Jesus to go. To go and tell those who don't yet know him about his life-changing, life-affirming presence in our lives.

Even in the darkness, we can bring them to the empty tomb so they can meet the risen Christ for themselves.

Amen.