

Merrylea Parish Church

Easter Sunday Homily 2020

from the Locum, the Reverend Jim Gibson.

Early on Sunday morning, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been taken away from the entrance. She went running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, whom Jesus loved, and told them, "They have taken the Lord from the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!"

Then Peter and the other disciple went to the tomb. The two of them were running, but the other disciple ran faster than Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent over and saw the linen wrappings, but he did not go in. Behind him came Simon Peter, and he went straight into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there and the cloth which had been round Jesus' head. It was not lying with the linen wrappings but was rolled up by itself. Then the other disciple who had reached the tomb first, also went in; he saw and believed. (They still did not understand the scripture which said that he must rise from death.) Then the disciples went back home.

Mary stood crying outside the tomb. While she was still crying, she bent over and looked in the tomb and saw two angels there dressed in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been, one at the head and the other at the feet. "Woman, why are you crying?" they asked her. She answered, "They have taken my Lord away, and I do not know where they have put him!" Then she turned round and saw Jesus standing there; but she did not know it was Jesus. "Woman, why are you crying?" Jesus asked her. "Who is it that you are looking for?" She thought he was the gardener, so she said to him, "If you took him away, sir, tell me where you have put him, and I will go and get him."

Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned to him and said in Hebrew, "Rabboni!" (This means "Teacher.")

"Do not hold on to me," Jesus told her, "because I have not yet gone back up to my Father. But go to my brothers and tell them that I am returning to him who is my Father and their Father, my God and their God."

So Mary Magdalene went and told the disciples that she had seen the Lord and related to them what he had told her. (St. John 20: 1-18).

Over a very short period of time the threat of the coronavirus has brought about changes to our daily living that are quite extraordinary and, for many people, even frightening. Our whole way of life has suddenly changed. Our family activities, our work patterns, our leisure time. 'Stay home. Support the NHS. Save lives' we are told. Sensibly, the vast majority of us are doing just that. The way we are as a church family has dramatically changed. No longer can we meet together for worship or social activities. Instead, we are doing our best to keep in touch by a myriad different ways, no less so than through these devotional reflections posted each week on our church website and Facebook. But, already, people are wondering when will things get back to what they were? Will life, as we knew it, ever be the same again?

What did you make of the above story from John's gospel? It lies at the very heart of Christian faith.

Is it fake news or hopeful reality?

Back then, people just didn't know what to think. Mary thinks Jesus' body has been stolen and, then, mistakes him for a gardener; Peter sees the linen wrappings, but can't work out what's going on; the disciples don't know their own scripture and Thomas refuses to believe unless he sees the scars of the nails.

Confusion. Confusion. Confusion.

But now, we know, the reason for all this confusion is because, forty, fifty, sixty years later, the gospel writers are trying as best they can to look back on these events and describe them for us: how people felt that for them their world would never be the same again. The problem was that the writers just didn't have adequate language to describe whatever it was that actually happened. The result has been that down through centuries the Church has always struggled to express the inexpressible and explain the inexplicable facts of Easter.

I have never been much interested in the mechanics of what happened, but I am very much interested in what Jesus was trying to tell us from that cross as we struggle with the challenges we face.

So: what actually happened? The truth is, we don't know.

Something happened. That's for sure. People's lives were changed as a consequence. It was a time of transformation. A moment in their life when the mists of confusion cleared bringing renewed strength and confidence surging through them, creating within a sense of energy, resilience and release. It made of them new people. Ever to be identified, known and marked as apostles of the man from Nazareth.

The resurrection of Jesus is not an argument to be won or lost. Still less is it a philosophical argument. That's why rational scepticism about the empty tomb just doesn't hold water.

The resurrection of Jesus is more the foundation of 'identity' than the basis for argument. It is who we are!

So: will life, as we knew it, ever be the same again?

Yes, of course. No matter how long this coronavirus nightmare may last, once it is over, it's over; and the world will move on. It always has in the past and will do so in the future. But must our future life be exactly what it once was? Could it not be something other, something more considerate, more compassionate perhaps?

One of the most reassuring happenings of this whole terrible time has been the mobilisation of hundreds of thousands of volunteers not only to support the courageous work of the NHS but to try to protect the weakest and the most vulnerable people within our communities. People have been buying shopping, collecting prescriptions, telephoning the elderly housebound and using social media ensuring that folks who cannot fend for themselves are not left, alone, forgotten. It's a form of resurrection proving that though much has been cancelled, changed and postponed the love of God is never cancelled, changed nor postponed. That love has always been particular for those most dependent and fearful; and the manner in which we can share that love defines us as to who we are and what we are.

Uncertainty and bewilderment, confusion even, may overshadow many at this time. But remember this: that wherever love is, God is found. Remember also: that in whatever situation you, and your loved ones, may find yourself right now, whether you are alone or with others, God loves you with a love that will never end.

Christ is risen.
He is risen indeed!

Happy Easter!

Prayer:

God of the ages and my God too, today there is much that is confusing and unsettling. We are constrained within our homes for fear of contracting the virus overshadowing our lives.

Schools are closed and business shut down. Its as though war has broken out. Though our enemy is unseen, people suffer and, sadly, some die. In my uncertainty I pray to you my God for your love has never failed even in the darkest of times. Bless the work of our hospital workers and all who volunteer support within our communities. Comfort those who have lost loved ones; and to all, such as myself, strengthen our resolve to do all we can to keep ourselves safe, healthy and in good spirit.

On this most holy day I give thanks for that love which endures all things and, which, even on a cross defied the power of death. Within my own home, today and every day, I worship you the God of love for your mercy forgives my shortcomings and by your grace you call me your own. Throughout coming days, resurrect in my life faith, hope and love and by these three may I live humbly true to the best within me. May your love surround my family, my friends, the members of my church congregation and all who cry out in loneliness or fear. Till we meet again.

These prayers I offer in Jesus' name, in whose words I also say: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours. Now and evermore. AMEN.