

Christ is Risen!

A sermon preached at Summertown United Reformed Church on Easter Sunday, 23rd March 2008, by Rev'd Pauline Main, based on John 20:1-18

John 20:1-18

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. ² So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him."³ Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. ⁴ The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵ He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶ Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷ and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. ⁸ Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; ⁹ for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ¹⁰ Then the disciples returned to their homes.

¹¹ *But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; ¹² and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. ¹³ They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." ¹⁴ When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵ Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." ¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). ¹⁷ Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" ¹⁸ Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.*

Sermon

JESUS IS ALIVE

We are well aware that the different gospel accounts of what happened on the first Easter differ, they don't harmonise into one story.

That's not surprising -
they are reports from independent witnesses telling their tale;
read newspaper accounts of the same news story today and see if they agree!

But it is very clear from the gospels that what happened led to the conviction amongst the apostles that the **Lord had risen**.

The verses from John's gospel tell an emotional story.

Mary Magdalene - and all of Jesus friends - have had a harrowing time.

They are frightened, unsure, ashamed.

They have lost the person they love; not just through an ordinary death - they have watched him suffer an agonising and needless death. Anyone who has watched a loved one suffer will understand all too well what Mary's feelings were, and why she is desolate that after all this, now the body has been taken and she cannot even say a final goodbye.

She wants to be with him for one last time (she talks not about a body, "we do not know where they have put him." To the angel - "They have taken my Lord away".)

Perhaps Mary thought that Jesus' enemies had removed the body, or that the tomb had been disturbed by robbers - common occurrence. Can't face things on her own, so she goes for Peter and "the other disciple Jesus loved" (probably John).

Peter, John hurry to the tomb. Peter rushes in first.

But it is John who understands what has happened, when he finally follows Peter into the tomb. A moment of insight unique amongst the disciples, he believes because he sees the sign, the empty tomb.

For the others it is when they meet the risen Lord.

The two men return home - we can imagine them arguing about what has happened and what it means.

RECOGNITION

Mary Magdalene stays outside the tomb, lost in her grief. All the empty tomb means to her is that she cannot say goodbye to her Lord and friend. The angels, the Lord himself have no effect, until he speaks her name.

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

Suddenly the moment of recognition. She knows who it is.

And not just the man she has known.

Rabboni, "Teacher", "My master" is, I understand, a version of the word Rabbi, used when addressing God.

So Mary has her own moment of insight - he is the risen Lord, the Christ.

The stories of the resurrection appearances of Jesus are about the disciples seeing and **recognising** their Lord. Mary, Thomas [John 20:26-29], the apostles in the upper room [John 20: 19-23]; grief is turned to joy.

One commentator suggests that the resurrection appearances of Jesus are a **"transition"**, to help the disciples who had known Jesus as a human person link the new experience of his fellowship with them in spirit with the old experiences during his lifetime.

Whether this is the case, In John's gospel there is also **reassurance to disciples of the future (us)** that we can fully share in knowing Christ. We too can meet the risen Lord, through his spirit.

"Blessed are those who have NOT seen and yet believe" [John 20:29], the risen Lord says to Thomas.

Mary Magdalene's experience reminds us that God in **Christ speaks personally** - to us as to Mary **he calls us by name and reaches out to us**, invites us into relationship with him, this new relationship in the spirit.

The Easter story is about **our response** as well as that of the disciples.

So - Jesus is alive - and calls his followers by name.

“DO NOT CLING TO ME”

Mary Magdalene must have been overjoyed when the Lord spoke to her. Not surprisingly she wants to embrace him, but this he won't allow - "Do not hold on to me", he says [John 20:17].

Despite her moment of insight, Mary wants things back as they were, she wants the human Jesus back. But as we have seen, things are different now. Jesus is risen, but he does not pick up his earthly life again and go on as before, **he is going to the Father**. He will stay with the disciples only through his spirit.

Mary has to learn to let go and to move forward and to meet her Lord in a new way. This must have been difficult for her - she has lost him painfully once; now, finding him again, not his body to anoint but the living Lord, **she must almost at once let him go**.

LETTING GO

And we know how **painful** letting go is – it is an experience we can all share.

But we can also realise that so often before there can be new life there must be **a letting go, a loss** - "little death" experiences (without the cross, no resurrection, no hope of eternal life).

In our personal relationships, if we let ourselves and our needs die a little, we find we can become closer to others

Parents must be willing to "let go" their children as they grow and spread their wings, so that they can experience a new life as maturing adults

When we work together as churches, we must be willing to let some of our cherished traditions die, so that new ways of working can be born – perhaps we are not good at this!

When we work together as nations, we must be willing to let go some of our past, so that we may move into the future together - nations of the EU struggle with this.

HOPE FROM SORROW

Letting go then is difficult for us, it was difficult for Mary Magdalene and the other disciples, but through letting go lies the way to renewal.

The **hope of Easter** does not come out of a blindness to reality, of forgetting what the world is really like. **It comes out of sorrow, and darkness, grief and pain.** Christ's victory has a price - it is gained by pain and suffering.

It **costs him** the mental agony of betrayal and denial by his closest followers, of feeling deserted even by God; it costs him the physical torment of the cross. This was graphically brought home in the BBC drama *The Passion*.

It **costs his friends too** - in seeing his suffering, in facing up to what has happened, after all their hopes, and in facing their own behaviour, their loss.

Death and resurrection belong together. There is no new life without pain (cf childbirth); that is how the world is. We might like it to be different, but this is the world that God has made. In the death and resurrection of Christ, God is with us in this world he has made, taking responsibility, taking its pain and overcoming it.

Out of that struggle comes the victory and the joy of the resurrection morning. Light begins to shine - Mary Magdalene is given a new start from the ashes of the old.

She cannot go back to the old times, sharing fellowship with Jesus, sitting at his feet; that is over; the Lord is risen and calls her to new life with him.

And Immediately she is **given a task to do** - to witness to the others that she has met the Lord.

CONCLUSION

Christ is **alive and calls us by name**, calls us to new life in him, calls us to share in the task of bringing in God's kingdom of love.

He invites us to recognise him, not least in those we meet day by day.

In Christ we see God ("he who has seen me has seen the Father"), and in one another we can see Christ "what you do for the least of these my brothers, you do for me"

He invites us to a new life in which **our past is not forgotten or obliterated** - the risen Lord still bears the scars of his crucifixion.

The invitation is to a life in which we are called to **let go of those things which imprison us to the past**; and to move forward in faith.