
Sunday 12th April 2020 – Easter Sunday.

Readings: Jeremiah 31:1-6 and John 20:1-18

Jeremiah 31:1-6

At that time,” declares the Lord, “I will be the God of all the families of Israel, and they will be my people.” This is what the Lord says: “The people who survive the sword will find favour in the wilderness; I will come to give rest to Israel.”

The Lord appeared to us in the past, saying: “I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness. I will build you up again, and you, Virgin Israel, will be rebuilt. Again you will take up your tambourines and go out to dance with the joyful. Again you will plant vineyards

on the hills of Samaria; the farmers will plant them and enjoy their fruit. There will be a day when watchmen cry out on the hills of Ephraim, ‘Come, let us go up to Zion, to the Lord our God.’”

John 20:1-18

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put him!”

So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus’ head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen. Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.) Then the disciples went back to where they were staying.

Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus’ body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.

They asked her, “Woman, why are you crying?”

“They have taken my Lord away,” she said, “and I don’t know where they have put him.” At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.

He asked her, “Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?”

Thinking he was the gardener, she said, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him.”

Jesus said to her, “Mary.”

She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, “Rabboni!” (which means “Teacher”).

Jesus said, “Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’”

Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: “I have seen the Lord!” And she told them that he had said these things to her.

Reflection

John is the only gospel writer to start his account of the empty tomb with the detail that the action begins 'while it was still dark'. Perhaps this is to indicate that it appears as if the light of Jesus has gone out, but this darkness, like the dark we see in the early hours, is a prelude to a brilliant new sunrise that is about to dawn. Mary Magdalene is mentioned as the first witness to these events in all four gospels; the identities of the other women vary, but Mary Magdalene is the one consistent figure present. This, incidentally, is the first time she is mentioned in John's gospel, but her role here is pivotal.

When Mary finds that the stone has been removed, she jumps to conclusions. It's interesting to consider why the stone had been removed. We may assume it is so that Jesus could get out, but Jesus didn't need it to be taken away for him to leave. The stone is rolled away not for Jesus to get out, but for the witnesses to get in, to see for themselves what had happened. Nevertheless, Mary's perception of what has happened is that someone has entered and stolen the body, so she flees back to Peter and the other disciple, who many believe to be John, to tell them.

Peter and John both run to the tomb, with John, who is younger, arriving first. Whereas John initially appears cautious and just looks in, Peter, true to his impulsive character, runs straight in. They see the linen strips of cloth lying there, but the curious detail is that they appear to be laid out in position as if Jesus' body has just disappeared. The strips of cloth are not in a heap on the floor as if hurriedly removed, but in place like a balloon that has deflated. The cloth that had covered his head is laying separately. It is at this point that John goes in and we're told 'He saw and believed'. But quite what he believed at this point cannot be stated with certainty as the next verse tells us, 'They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead'.

The focus returns to Mary standing outside of the tomb. Weeping, she enters the tomb to see two angels. In response to their almost ridiculous question about why she is weeping, Mary repeats her interpretation of the situation; the theft of her friend's body.

Finally, she turns, and sees a man she believes to be the gardener. 'Who is it that you are looking for?' he asks.

Mary had come looking for a corpse, a dead body, but he comes to her as a living body. She does not recognise him visually, but when he speaks her name, 'Mary', she recognises his voice. It is reminiscent of Jesus' words in 10:27 when he says that his sheep hear his voice. Who are we looking for this morning? Will we recognise his voice, his prompting when it comes? Will we understand, this Easter morning, the momentous change that Jesus' resurrection brings? Up till now he has referred to his disciples as friends or servants, but now he calls the disciples his brothers and instructs Mary to tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God'.

In Tom Wright's words, something has altered, decisively. Something has been achieved. A new relationship has sprung into life like a sudden spring flower. And this invitation is for each of us this morning. We are welcomed, as brothers and sisters, adopted as children of our Heavenly Father, co-heirs with Christ. To come back to the image of light and dark that this passage and indeed this gospel starts with, this is the moment the light breaks through once and for all. This is the moment of new creation, the moment of a new relationship with God through his Son Jesus Christ. Who are you looking for this morning? As you hear Jesus say to you the words from our first passage, "I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness", how do you respond?

Wishing you all a blessed Easter.

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