

Easter Day 2021: 4th April 2021

Acts 10: 34 – 43; Mark 16: 1 – 8

It's the Day of Resurrection! The biggest non-event in history, what have we got to show for it? Nothing: an empty tomb and an angel saying here's not here. As an event it's a damp squib, but as the reading from the Acts of the Apostles makes clear, it happened in the context of the whole of Jesus' earthly life and ministry; and in that context it is the climax of a story that starts with Mary being overshadowed by the Holy Spirit and becoming pregnant, goes through Jesus teaching and healing, on towards his betrayal and suffering, and right to the crucifixion - but doesn't end there.

The resurrection isn't just a story about an empty tomb. It's a story that tells us that Jesus simply couldn't be kept crucified. You can't have resurrection without the crucifixion that preceded it. And that is a truth it might be hard to come to terms with. It would be lovely always to fast forward to renewal and fresh

potential. But you can't get there without loss and suffering and 'a sword piercing your own her heart also.' But just as you can't have resurrection without crucifixion, so also you can't have crucifixion without resurrection – because without the resurrection the crucifixion is just a story about a bloke getting killed – and the sad fact is that that happens every day.

The crucifixion was a once and for all, never to be repeated, event. The writer of the epistle to the Hebrews stresses that whereas the benefits of the sacrifices performed by priests in the Jewish Temple have to be obtained again and again, year after year, there is no longer any need for that. Whatever it is that Jesus achieves on the cross – think if it as you will: a sacrifice, a payment of debt, a ransom, a punishment for sin, the ultimate expression of selfless love – whatever it is, it's complete. It's happened and it's done and it's over with. But the story of the resurrection is never complete. It's a story with an infinite number of infinitely variable endings.

I don't know how many people can remember far enough back, to sitting on the carpet at school as the teacher read from a big, illustrated book. And before turning the page, the teacher says "I wonder what happens next . . ." At one level that creates an opportunity for young minds to develop a sense of logic and sequence. Given the data we have already received, what is likely to happen next? What are the probable next steps in the sequence of events we've already heard about? But at another level the teacher's question is an invitation for young minds to explore their imaginations, to be creative, to dream dreams, to make it up for themselves unconstrained by what anybody else might have committed to print, to be the masters of their own destinies within the boundless limits of whatever they might want to think. I wonder what happens next . . .

The account of the resurrection in St. Mark's Gospel, the particular account we've heard proclaimed this morning, is a bit like that. It begs the question: what

happens next? We've read from Mark chapter 16. We stopped half way through verse eight. If you look at your Bibles at home the likelihood is that printed in the Bibles there's another half to verse eight and then another 11 verses. But scholars reckon that Mark's Gospel originally didn't contain those verses: it stopped half way through what we call verse eight: "So they fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." – and that leaves us saying "I wonder what happens next . . ."

Well, a logical sequence of events to develop would be that the women got over their fear and told others, that there were probably some more, positive, resurrection appearances that galvanised people into action, and that they started spreading the word in a manner like what's described in the Acts of the Apostles. And boring, neat minded editors have thought that it would be better for us if that logic were spelled out, rather than leaving the thing, hanging unsatisfactorily in the

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air, not knowing what people might make up given half a chance. So they added verses nine to 20.

But if we allow ourselves to wonder what happens next, we hear and receive an invitation to enter into the story ourselves, to explore our imaginations, undaunted and unconstrained by the forces of convention and domination and violence and power; of darkness and oppression; of racism and patriarchy and misogyny and homophobia; of education and class and privilege – because all those forces have been dealt with, once and for all, at the crucifixion. And the benefit of that comes free, unconditionally, with no strings attached . . . so long as we don't cling on to Good Friday, but allow the resurrected Jesus to reimagine with us the boundless limits of where our stories might take us.

I finished last week's sermon, on Palm Sunday, with a poem by W. H. Vanstone. Here's another, entitled Joseph of Arimathea's Easter.

“He's gone,” says Joseph, and, with Pilate's leave
Eases the nails and lowers him from the Tree,
Wraps him in reverent and tender thoughts
And lays him in the cave called Memory.

That cave is deeply hewn in Joseph's heart:
All that's within will always be his own:
In memory's cave the treasure of his past
Is safe for ever, walled and sealed by stone.

“He's safe,” says Joseph, “safe in this cool place
And no one now can take my Lord away.
In years to come I'll still see his dear face
As clearly as I've seen it on this day.”

“He's gone!” cries Joseph at the empty tomb:
But Mary says, “He's left a word for you:
He cannot rest content to be your past,
So he has risen to be your future too.”

Amen.