

EASTER SUNDAY MORNING 2010

John 20.1-18

INTRODUCTION

One thing that never ceases to amaze me is how the familiar Scriptures speak to us afresh time and time again. I absolutely love this story of the first Easter morning, and in particular that recorded in John's gospel which we have read again together. I must have read it, and heard it read, hundreds of times. Yet something fresh arises every time. Please note not necessarily something new; we do not seek novelty in the Scriptures each time we approach them; but something fresh, something vibrant and living that speaks to where we are now. This year as I read and pondered the story again I was struck by John's emphasis on the tomb. In these few verses he refers specifically to the tomb no less than 10 times. (19.41,42; 20.1,2,3,4,6,8,11(x2)) But then the tomb is never mentioned again. The disciples, it appears, never went back to the tomb. There was no need; there was no point for Jesus was not there; as the angels say to the women, *'He is not here; he has risen, just as he said.'* (Mt 28.6)

Now I have been privileged to visit Jerusalem on several occasions now; and each time I have visited the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. I have sat and watched the pilgrims entering the shrine over the empty tomb. I have also been to the Garden Tomb. Understandably people find visiting these places special. I am sure for many they have been profound moments of meeting with the risen Lord. But He is not there in a confined way.

If you ever have a chance to go to Jerusalem and the Holy Land do so; you will find it enriches your grasp of the Scriptures; it will inspire you. Make sure that

your visit does not just reflect on the past but also on the current situation with the particular difficulties the minority Christian community (both Palestinian and Jewish) face – and their situation is very difficult; the real hardship and injustices that the Palestinians live with every day; and the desperate spiritual need of God’s ancient people the Jews. All of these will disturb and challenge you. All of them should be held in our prayers regularly.

But when visiting the tomb ponder the wonder of the resurrection and pray to meet with the risen Lord; but also remember in a very deep way, He is not here.

The disciples never went back to the tomb for this was not where they would find or meet with their risen Lord. Indeed their experience is that they never quite knew when or where the Lord would appear to them because the risen Lord was always one step ahead of them.

THE RISEN JESUS – Always one step ahead

None of the disciples expected Jesus to be raised from the dead. Then when he is raised he does not immediately appear to them but allows them to find the empty tomb; he leaves angels to pass on the news; then he appears to them, unexpectedly. The story of the next 40 days through to the Ascension is one of never knowing when Jesus will appear, or to whom he will do so. The disciples could not predict what he would do next. This of course had also been something of their experience throughout the 3 years that they had travelled with Jesus. It was certainly to be their experience after Pentecost when time and again the Spirit of Jesus leads them into unexpected places and to make

the good news of the risen Lord known to unexpected people. It seems the risen Jesus is always one step ahead.

Nothing here has changed. The risen Jesus today is always one step ahead of us; calling us forward, drawing us on; leading us into places and ministering with people that we perhaps had never expected. We can never button down or pigeon hole the risen Jesus; he will always be one step ahead of us. This should both keep us very alert and attentive, but also comfort and strengthen us; if he is ahead of us he knows where he is taking us and we can trust his sovereign love in this whole process of following where he leads, wherever that may be. Since he is always one step ahead we will have to be a people open to change; to be changed by him to become more like him.

THE RISEN JESUS – Risen in a body

Now the risen Jesus appears in a body. What is clear is that the body is different; Jesus appears, and then disappears. He is not immediately recognised by those who had been with him for three years. So it is different. But it is very clearly a physical body; the risen Jesus can be held onto, he bears the marks of his crucifixion; he eats and drinks. The risen body may be different but it is still very much the body of Jesus. The hope of resurrection that then appears in the letters of the New Testament, most notably in 1 Corinthians 15, is also the hope of a resurrection body. We look forward to sharing in Jesus' bodily resurrection, not some vague ethereal spirit, and certainly not floating on clouds with wings and a harp. The resurrection is, in this sense, very earthy; it is a bodily resurrection.

This must impact, then, our conviction of the holiness of the body. This is already clear in the creation story; God makes us bodily people, and this is 'very good'; it is clear in the incarnation, God becomes fully human including going through all the processes of growth within the womb, through birth, childhood and adolescence. Our bodies are part of God's gift of who we are. Now they decay, they break, they fail us but they are holy. The reality of the resurrection body only adds to this truth. In the coming of the Spirit we also find that our bodies are the very Temple of the Spirit; they are the place where God touches the earth.

So we should treat our bodies with dignity. We should treat the bodies of others with dignity too. This is why child abuse, and particularly sexual abuse, is so offensive; it degrades and dishonours, holy bodies. So the destruction and mutilation of the bodies of our Christian brothers and sisters recently in Nigeria is an affront to us all, and to God. So too is violence against sisters and brothers in Zimbabwe, Orissa, Iran and other places besides. We need to stand up for the rights of our Christian sisters and brothers around the world. But we also need to ensure that we treat all human beings with equal dignity recognising that each is made in the image of God; that each body is designed to be holy to the Lord.

Indeed the resurrection of Jesus impacts our moral and ethical thinking in every area of life. It insists that in every way we treat the body with respect and honour; so it will make us reflect on what civil society and community should be like. It will impact our thinking on the rights of the unborn child; on the dignity of those whose bodies are different from most of us; on our sexual ethics; on the dignity to be afforded those whose bodies are failing at the close of life. We do not escape these questions by just looking ahead to a new

resurrection body, we recognise that our bodies now are to be holy to the Lord.

THE RISEN JESUS – Sending to tell

When the risen Jesus meets Mary he calls her by name. This is incredibly powerful; she is an individual known and loved by her Lord. He calls each of us by name too; as he had earlier said to the disciples the shepherd *'calls his own sheep by name and leads them out'* (John 10.3). Then he says to her *'Go to my brothers and tell them ...'*. Mary is given the responsibility of sharing the amazing good news that Jesus is alive to the disciples. This is precisely what she then does.

Now Mary here is acting as a witness, indeed at this point the witness, to the resurrection. Jesus chose to reveal himself first to the women, and to give them the task of bearing witness to the others. This is 1 reason why many, including myself, see women as potential apostolic leaders in the church. Since the risen Lord gave this first task to Mary and the other women it seems entirely appropriate that he might continue to call women to do the same today. Now of course this is not the whole argument, and others understand the significance differently believing that I and others push the text too far to reach this conclusion. But it is for me one of the reasons why I would be very happy to have women bishops in our church. I add here that I also want to seek to ensure that those for whom this is not acceptable still have an honoured and valued place within our church; finding such a resolution is not proving easy but I continue to pray that we will find it.

Now whether or not you share my conviction about women bishops one theme is clearly agreed by all from this story; Mary is an evangelist, a sharer of

the good news. The wonderful news that Jesus has conquered death and is alive, can be talked with and followed has to be shared. Everyone who encounters the risen Lord has a responsibility to share the news with others. The church as a whole cannot hold this news to herself. We have to be a people in mission telling the world about Jesus, his death and his resurrection. No one can be excluded from this; it is too good a story not to tell it to everybody. Given it is such exciting news the sharing of it should always be done with joy, respect and openness. It will always be done in ways that honour the other, who is made in God's image and whose body is designed to be a temple of the Spirit. This reality will always make evangelism that is true to the risen Lord filled with gentleness and respect, and with enthusiasm and conviction. We will be an evangelistic people.

CONCLUSION

On the first great Easter day Jesus was raised from the dead. The disciples struggled to grasp it but they knew the tomb was empty, the body was gone and so they never went back to the tomb. The risen Jesus was to be met anywhere and everywhere in the world. He still is; the Lord is here. The Jesus was raised in body; this shapes our thinking about our bodies; it shapes our moral and ethical persuasions about how we view everyone's bodily life. The news that Jesus who died has been raised and is alive now is so exciting, and so vitally important for all of humanity that we cannot but share the news with everyone; the risen Jesus sends us to tell the world the good news that death has been defeated. This risen Lord was also always one step ahead of the disciples; they never knew quite where they would next encounter him. Nothing has changed the risen Lord is always one step ahead of us, calling us

forward by name and drawing us on together. Let us respond like Mary, and the disciples, by following him wherever he may lead.