



Sermon for Easter Sunday evening, 31st March 2024

Mark 16.1-8, Acts 10.34-43

God of glory, by the raising of your Son you have broken the chains of death & hell: fill your Church with faith and hope; for a new day has dawned, and the way to life stands open, in Jesus Christ.

The angel said to the women, 'do not be alarmed. You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised...' (Mark 16.6)

1. A missing manuscript?

A week ago, on Palm Sunday – having re-enacted Jesus' dramatic entry into Jerusalem, on a donkey – a group of us acted out the story of Jesus' trial, suffering & death, from Mark's Gospel; the oldest & most immediate of all accounts of Jesus' death: an account, in many ways, much more spare, in its attention to detail, than that of St John, which some of us also heard on Good Friday.

So remember, last Sunday, we heard of Jesus' Last Supper, with his disciples; and the atmosphere then darkening, as Jesus prays in the Garden of Gethsemane, his disciples deny him, betray him or flee. Then we heard of Jesus' trial, as an innocent man, before the authorities; and Jesus being handed over to be crucified – an agonising death on a cross, for us & for our salvation.

+At the end of the drama, following his death, Joseph of Arimathea has asked Pilate for Jesus' body, laid him in a stone cold tomb, rolling a large stone against the door. +Three of the women followers saw where Jesus was laid.

Well this morning – EASTER Sunday, the 1st day of the week - the story continues, and we hear the official ending of Mark's Gospel, his account of the Jesus' resurrection. What happens?

Early in the morning, as the sun rises, the women go to the tomb, to anoint Jesus' body for burial. But what do they find? Amazingly, the stone has been rolled away, and they see an angel dressed, who tells them,

'Do not be alarmed. You are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here... Go, tell his disciples that he is going ahead of you to Galilee, there you will see him.'

Imagine how you would have felt? Someone you knew intimately & loved & followed, God's anointed one, missing from his tomb; and despite the reassurance of the mysterious angel, that Jesus is alive, and has gone on to Galilee, you are amazed & terrified, just as the women were.....

Well this is where the 1st part of our mystery plays out, because some believe that Mark didn't end like this – rather it ended with a more decisive encounter with Jesus – and there is a missing manuscript, telling of the resurrection at it really happened! [A bit like a novel, published this week, by Tom Shakespeare, my brother, about another missing manuscript – and I won't spoil the plot!]

But, in fact, as others point out, this ending is true to Mark after all; because he invites us into the story, to meet Jesus, alive & risen, for ourselves... In other words, there isn't a missing manuscript after all; but rather the ending is abrupt, because the story of Jesus draws us in, to become part of the drama, and to experience – for ourselves – Jesus alive again.

As Rowan Williams puts it, “we are drawn back... into re-creating a relationship of trust & love on the far side of the most extreme human realities, suffering, abandonment & death. That is what the story points us to. +the conclusion says to us that faith in the crucified and risen Jesus is possible + we must go on exploring, until we find it.”

2. A living encounter...

So Easter tells us that something amazing has indeed happened; that Jesus, the anointed one, God's own Son – whom the disciples & women & crowds experienced in Galilee; Jesus, the one who was cruelly put to death on Good Friday, suffering & dying for us – is alive again; as the women at the tomb, and the disciples, and many others went on to experience: as testified in the other Gospel accounts of that 1st Easter + indeed in the New Testament as a whole.

As we hear St Peter testifying to the household of Cornelius, the Roman Centurion & his household, in our reading from Acts:

- ‘God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.
- They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses
- He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.’

In other words, Jesus' followers – and others, like Paul, who was vehemently opposed to Christianity, before meeting Jesus, on the road to Damascus – and billions more, through the centuries, have discovered a living encounter with Jesus Christ, risen, ascended, but still with us, through his Holy Spirit:-

☐ which is really why I'm here today, because the same thing happened to me, when I was between 15 years old... I too, encountered the risen Christ, not in a vision or in the flesh, but through a set of life-changing experiences – while I was away at school – of His presence with me, in the depths of my being, and enveloping me, in what I can only describe, as an amazing blanket of peace & joy & love; the most real thing I've ever experienced, God bringing peace, salvation, hope + a way to follow, into the future, and light in hard times.

☐ For many the experience may be less dramatic; God's presence in Jesus, a gradual dawning realisation of this Good News of faith; a life-giving Christian community; or even

more likely, acts of compassion, love & service, by Christians, or others acting in a Christ-like way, in our everyday world. The discovery that God is real, Christ is with us, and there is hope. Daring to discover, for ourselves, glimpses of his presence, his kingdom, his light + love + peace, shining out, into our world.

3. Good News – “Go & Tell!” + This leads us, finally, to the last part of our Easter mystery, namely the invitation & commission to share the Good News, to “Go & Tell!” As Peter again says, in his witness to Cornelius,

‘Jesus commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.’

This is the Good News, the Gospel or – in Greek – evangelion: that God is with us, that Jesus Christ was sent by God to bring hope and life, not only by his preaching of God’s Kingdom, but especially through his life-giving death & resurrection, by which we are reconciled to God, and receive forgiveness of our sins. Yes, ‘Go & Tell’ Peter says; the disciple, remember, who failed Jesus, denying him 3 times, but was restored by Jesus, and forgiven – just as we all need forgiveness – and commissioned to go out + share this good news with others. Hope, for a world, in so much darkness, confusion, sickness & need.

It doesn’t matter whether you say it with words or with your life, & your love for one another; but ‘Go & Tell’, that others may see the light+ come to Christ, to be forgiven, discovering his healing love & sharing his work in the world!

+ Let me finish, as we celebrate the joy of Easter – of Christ with us again– & our invitation to experience Him for ourselves, to enter the drama of His Gospel [the real ending or continuation of Mark]; to be open to encounter him + to share His Good News, with words of a poem...

It’s a long way off but inside it
There are quite different things going on:
Festivals at which the poor man
Is king and the consumptive is
Healed; mirrors in which the blind look
At themselves and love looks at them
Back; and industry is for mending
The bent bones and the minds fractured
By life. It’s a long way off, but to get
There takes no time and admission
Is free, if you purge yourself
Of desire, and present yourself with
Your need only and the simple offering
Of your faith, green as a leaf

May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

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