Sermon for Easter Sunday 2021 at Pulverbatch

Mark 16: 1-8

When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, ‘Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?’ When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, ‘Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.’ So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

Every Easter Sunday, we hear an account of the resurrection from one of three gospel writers in a three year rotation, Matthew, Mark or Luke. They are all different, which might make you doubt their reports – unless you think about the nature of reporting. Each writer comes from their own perspective, with different source material, just like different reporters today. They are unique, just as our own experience is unique. But Mark is the most surprising of the three – the whole gospel ends where our reading ended this morning, with the women fleeing the empty tomb in terror. There are a couple of extra endings tacked on, but you don’t have to be an expert to see that these were written by another hand, tidying up Mark’s abrupt ending. There are some theories around that the end of the manuscript has been lost, and that seems quite possible. But given that this is the version that has survived, we should ask ourselves what Mark might have meant by ending with a cliff hanger!

Let us enter into the narrative – three women at dawn, two days after the appalling, traumatic death of the man they loved and followed. They must have been numb with shock and grief, exhausted and bewildered. They go to perform a final act of care for Jesus, anointing his body, and they are worried about access. The tomb was closed by a rolling a great stone across – to get in they would need help. Imagine their feelings when they found the stone already rolled away: has the body been desecrated? Inside the tomb, they are greeted by a complete stranger. His words must have made little sense to them – Jesus is raised, you will see him in Galilee? What a nonsensical message! They have stood at the foot of the cross as he died, they were there when his body was laid in this exact tomb. They know he is dead, even if they wish it otherwise. They are well acquainted with death, this is a time when people died young and at home, everyone experienced death in a much more direct way than we do today. But this young man in white is compelling, and they are filled with terror and amazement. Something has happened far beyond their experience, and it shakes them deeply. They run away, too frightened to say anything to anyone.

That seems a very strange way to announce the good news of the resurrection of the Saviour of the world! We are invited to share first hand their immediate reactions, and it is not joy or Easter bunnies and chocolate eggs at all! But does it not give us a very direct way into the mystery of the raising of Jesus? We are not asked to accept it as a myth shrouded by the depths of time, a sacred tenet of the church wrapped in mystical impenetrable words. Instead, we have to make sense of the voices of three shaken frightened women, sharing their experience with us. We have to decide what we make of it

Of course the story doesn’t finish there – the women clearly did speak up in time, as we have the written evidence of the story they told. Indeed, we have a church history that stretches back to the witness of those disciples who did meet with Jesus in Galilee. What the man in white in the tomb said was borne out in the lives of those who met with the risen Jesus, who were so convinced of his reality that they were ready to turn their lives around, even die, to spread the good news. But how does the cliff hanger ending affect us?

When a story ends abruptly, suspending us in mid air, we fill in the final parts ourselves – and maybe this is what Mark intends us to do. Because this is not a story of long ago, with historical or cultural interest only. This is a story that compels a reaction from us. The risen Lord Jesus meets with us too – and for each of us, that will be different, just as it was for each of those gospel writers. We do not get to meet with Jesus physically, that was only for his disciples in the forty days after his resurrection. But because he rose again and ascended to God the Father, we all of us have the opportunity to encounter Jesus spiritually, moment by moment, in our ordinary lives.

On Easter morning after a really rubbish year, we may well meet Jesus as the bringer of good news, associated with the joyful return of spring. The darkness is behind us, death is defeated, hope is reborn. We are looking forward to protection by vaccines and gradual unlocking. The world is finally improving, or at any rate our small corner of it is. But Jesus is not the Easter bunny – he is not just a symbol of happier times. He comes to us through suffering, he has paid the price and conquered death for all time. He is the gate, the living water and the bread of life. He can be our Lord and God, if only we would let him.

When all hope is lost, he comes to us as a light in the darkness, a companion on the road and a guide to the right path. He will steady us when we think we can’t keep going, and show us which step to take next when we are horribly lost. His humanity shines through the gospel stories, living alongside us. He challenges and encourages from the pages of the Bible – and he speaks in our hearts when we are ready to listen. But he also sits at the right-hand side of the Father, interceding for us, standing in the place of judgement for us and assuring us of forgiveness.

He is there in all the little things of life. In the middle of a blazing argument, he offers us a rock to stand on, a place outside the hurt where we can make peace again. In the middle of a chaotic crisis, he speaks of his purposes for good, his love beyond our fear and panic. In the middle of a quite ordinary and average day, he is quietly present, helping us to see through his eyes. Even if we ignore him for 90% of the time, he is still there, forgiving, accepting, supporting and patiently waiting for us to notice him.

When we do pay attention to his presence, it is far more than a warm hug! He is life changing, transforming us bit by bit into our best selves. The more time we spend with him, the more we realise we have to let him work on us! He brings us up short against our shortcomings, not to make us feel inadequate or ashamed, but to show us how to change and grow. He shows us a bigger picture of the world, one where we don’t take centre stage. Our ego is dethroned and we begin to let love guide us instead of being battered this way and that by our own needs and desires.

The risen Jesus says “I am with you always, even to the end of time”. He stands at the gate of death, welcoming us into the Father’s presence. In him there is no fear, but perfect love. We need to imagine living in that love, because most of the time we are too bound up in ourselves to even try! No matter how often we choose instead to live in our own limited grumpy selves, he is there ready to receive us when we turn to him. He has no limit to forgiveness, no point of no return. I invite you to meet with him again this morning, to receive from him in the bread and wine of communion, to know him present here and now.

May your Easters be filled with his love, above and beyond all human love. May you know Christ’s new life, his hope, and his joy. Amen.

Revd Emma Phillips