



Sunday Reflection

in the Charges of St Margaret's, Renfrew
& St John's, Johnstone



For Sunday 31 March 2024

Easter Day

The Curate will preach at St John's :-

Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabbouni!' (which means Teacher). (John 20: 16)

An illustration to set the scene

'I know the face, I just can't put a name to it'. So people often say. Actually, not me. It isn't that I have a better memory than most of people I've known. Rather, it is that I remember voices, rather than faces, and so voices are precious to me. I can remember my mother's and my father's voices. I can hear the sound of my daughter's and grandchildren's voices in my head. I may see someone in the street and not remember them – until they speak.

Moments of recognition are part of significant relationships. Those times when one feels recognised and known and/or when you sense a kindred spirit in another. I'm sure we can recall such moments. They are instinctive rather than anything else. They don't come about through over-thinking them.

Recognising truth is more slippery. We've seen in the news recently that pictures can be deceptive. We may be unsure that we can believe what we (seem to) see. Moreover, the process of making sense of what's in front of us can be complicated. Perhaps you have had that experience of

witnessing something unexpected, perhaps shocking, perhaps just things out of order somehow, and of not being able, in the moment to make sense of them. You need more time or information for your head to catch up with what you are seeing or hearing.

What convinces *you* to believe the reality, when you're confronted with something that doesn't make sense at first?

Today's Gospel teaching

In today's Gospel and the verses that follow we trace the different ways in which the truth of Jesus' resurrection dawned among those who were the first witnesses of the empty tomb.

Mary Magdalene was the first. In the dark of early morning she didn't see into the tomb, only that the heavy stone had been rolled away. Her reaction was to jump to the obvious conclusion that someone had taken the body. So she runs to Simon Peter and John and tells them what she thinks she has discovered.

And they rush off to see with their own eyes, perhaps to check out if a woman has got it right, perhaps to look for Jesus' body or apprehend the thief.

John gets there first and peers in and he sees more – the linen cloths that the body had been wrapped in.

Peter, always the bold one gets there now and goes into the tomb and he sees more details, not just the linen wrappings, but the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, rolled up and put aside. We can imagine Peter's bemusement, as he tries to piece together the clues. To those who hear the story though, what is not said is becoming clearer. Jesus' body is not there.

And then John goes in, and his response is instantaneous, '*he saw and believed*' (v.8.) This was not head-knowledge, because we're told that they didn't yet understand the Scriptures that Jesus would be raised. It was heart-knowledge. A moment of recognition, from someone who was especially loved by Jesus.

Mary, outside the tomb, has not seen all this. She is still beside herself with loss and the fear that Jesus' body had been taken, preventing her from caring for it. Then she too bends down and is confronted with the sight of two angels, but before she has a chance to make sense of this, she turns - and there is Jesus. But she does not recognise him, until that is, he

speaks her name. And knowing him now, she acknowledges who he is to her, 'Rabbouni'., she says.

Understanding the meaning of what they have seen comes gradually, even for these first witnesses. It will take Jesus coming to them and, a week later, Thomas confessing his doubts until he can be the first confidently to declare, 'My Lord and my God'.

How can we reflect on the implications for our own lives?

The full meaning of the events of Easter Day dawns slowly for us too. We will journey for a further 50 days, exploring what the joy and gladness we experience today in our Lord's resurrection mean for us, the church and for the world. As we mark his Ascension into glory with the Father, we will remember his promise to be with us always and ultimately bring us into complete relationship with God. And as we experience again the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, we will realise that we have been given the means to discern the meaning and purpose God has for our lives.

We are not purveyors of false hope and fake news. We know that evil, and death and suffering are real. We are appalled at the poverty in our country, at the existence of war and conflict in Europe, the Middle East and Africa, we are ashamed that international action cannot stop children dying of hunger. We don't understand how what we see on our screens can be the stuff of hope. But we know that God raised Jesus from the dead and that now we must speak only the name of love and do only what brings us and other people together. That's our resurrection calling to recognise our relationship in solidarity with those whose names are written on God's hands.

Desmond Tutu, that great beacon of love, hope and Christian discipleship, expressed the meaning of resurrection for the world perfectly, in words we know through the hymn written by John Bell:

*Goodness is stronger than evil,
Love is stronger than hate.
Light is stronger than darkness,
Life is stronger than death.
Victory is ours, victory is ours
Through God who loves us.*

Faith is more than bare facts, about a quick news flash, an instant reaction to what we see and hear. How do we come to believe that resurrection means hope and the ultimate victory of good over evil?

- Through our experience of encountering the living Lord, in story, in prayer and by sharing his body and blood. And through those we have known whose lives have shown the meaning of the love of Christ,
- Through God's Word relayed to us in Holy Scripture, which becomes a part of us as we hear and sing it, week after week.
- Through the Church, its teachers, poets and musicians who give us ways to make sense of our faith experience. and to find not only personal meaning, but the revelations of centuries of wisdom. We are part of that living tradition, as we bring our lives and our times into conversation with the big story of the unfolding of God's love, justice and mercy for all.

Today, we don't need to grasp it all, only to feel the joy, the lifting of the burden of our own weaknesses and the assurance that there is hope. When Jesus called Mary by her name, she heard all she needed to know at that point: that Jesus had not been taken away from her; that he was there, alive, even if she could not touch him in the old way; and, that their relationship might be transformed, but had not been brought to an end. Her story is our story. for God has called us by name, as we read in the Prophet Isaiah.

*Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.*

...

*Because you are precious in my sight,
and honoured, and I love you... (Isaiah 43:1-4)*

Mary knew that this wonderful knowledge, however personal, is not to be hoarded for private use, but is meant to be shared. She hastened to tell the other disciples and to talk to them about it, just as we share our faith, here in church. But she did not stop at that. It is likely that Mary Magalene became an Apostles of the early church, taking a lead in sharing her knowledge of the Lord and the meaning of his life, death and resurrection.

That is our next part in the story. To bring the good news to others and witness to God's love in our lives.

Let us pray in Christ's name for love and hope to transform every life and to show us how to be life for the world.

Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabbouni!' (which means Teacher). (John 20: 16)

and the Rector at St Margaret's :-

On this glorious Easter Day let us rejoice in the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, who died and rose again to save us all. Alleluia, Christ is risen!

"Jesus said to her, 'Mary.' She turned..." John 20:16

An illustration to set the scene

Even in these days of reality television and game shows, some of the most popular programmes worldwide are still murder mystery dramas.

Although we shy away from such grisly stories in our real lives, a good "**whodunnit**" can get us hooked.

From the safety of our armchairs, we watch as different detectives struggle to work out not only who did it, but why and how.

And we come up with our own theories.

Sometimes there are so many suspects (*and far too many red herrings*) that we, and the detectives, remain completely baffled until the final scene.

Sometimes, the underlying theme is one of mistaken identity.

The killer got the wrong person.

The body was wrongly identified.

The principal witness made assumptions when naming the murderer – or simply wasn't believed because people were sure it couldn't be them.

Life is made even more difficult for the investigating officers when the body disappears.

Today's Gospel teaching

Many of these essential elements of a good *whodunnit* find echoes in the Easter story.

There was certainly a murder, a judicial murder – Jesus had been executed by the authorities, not for any capital crime but because he was dangerous to them.

His body had seemingly disappeared.

And Mary Magdalene at first failed to identify not the killer, but the victim.

Only when he called her by name did she recognise him.

But various biblical accounts show that she, as principal witness to the resurrection, was not believed at first.

Even in today's Gospel, Peter and the other disciple came to see the empty tomb for themselves and then went home, missing out on the final clue.

Today's Gospel is a very special one, not least because it speaks to all of us who may have failed to recognise Jesus in our lives.

Mary remained at the tomb alone until someone else arrived.

At first, she assumed this newcomer was the gardener.

We may all have theories about this case of mistaken identity.

Was Mary blinded by her tears?

Her grief at his death would have been intensified by the disappearance of his body – she could not even say her last farewells.

Or did she turn away from looking into the dark tomb only to be blinded by the rising sun behind Jesus – and thus fail to recognise the risen Son of God?

Whatever the reason, her assumption that this person was the gardener was understandable.

Yet the sound of his voice, speaking her name, turned her grief into joy.

How often must she have heard his voice as she followed him during his earthly ministry, listening to his teaching or hearing him heal those who were sick.

Even then, however, it was not until he used her name that the penny finally dropped.

How often must he have spoken her name as his closest followers gathered together after a busy day, to hear him

explain some of his parables to them or simply make plans for the following day.

And now she knew that this was indeed the living, breathing Jesus, risen from the dead.

The miracle of Easter accomplished, the mystery solved, he entrusted her with spreading the good news that death was defeated.

Later, the other disciples would also be able to testify to the risen Christ as the foundations of the early Church were laid.

How can we apply the teaching to our own lives?

How do we bear witness to Jesus today?

Perhaps we can begin by following the example of Jesus himself in today's Gospel.

How do we greet a newcomer to church who seems in distress?

There's something special about using someone's name.

Saying, "**Are you all right, love?**" is probably the equivalent of those angels and Jesus saying, "**Woman, why are you weeping?**"

But how long does it take us to ask a stranger their name?

And then make an effort to remember it for the next time we meet?

Meet again we will, if we make them feel welcome.

We can help people to recognise Jesus simply by using their name as we reach out the hand of friendship – in his name.

And then they too may solve the greatest whodunnit of them all.

Not a murder, but an invitation to eternal life.

And, in Jesus, the one who knows us all by name, God dunnit.

Alleluia!

"Jesus said to her, 'Mary.' She turned..." John 20:16

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