

Resurrection movement : from darkness to light

In our gospel reading (John 20: 1-18) today we find Peter and John and Mary Magdalene coming to terms with the death of Jesus. Mary had been present at the crucifixion, standing nearby with Jesus's mother, John's gospel tells us.

Not only are they trying to cope with the loss of their dear friend Jesus—but they are having to cope with the enormity of the humiliation of his death—the one they had loved and followed was seemingly no more than a common criminal—a hoax or a fraud.

Peter had given up a respectable profession to follow the wandering preacher; Mary Magdalene had used her money and goods to support his ministry. It had all come to an inglorious end, and the upshot was that perhaps now even their own lives are in danger.

What had actually been accomplished in the past 3 years of their time with Jesus? A few people regaining their sight—but there were still a lot of blind people; a few lame people able to walk...but there were many still begging on the streets who couldn't; freedom.. but freedom from what exactly? The Romans were still running things and Pilate had demonstrated his power over their lives.

Even their own people had turned against Jesus, and so now these first disciples were also isolated from their own community.

It is in grief and perhaps confusion, that Mary Magdalene gets up so early, when it is still dark, to go to the place where Jesus was buried. It doesn't say in John's gospel that she was taking spices to anoint the body. All we know is simply that she went there, perhaps driven by sadness, driven by a desire to try to be close to the person she had given her life to. She went there when it was still dark—perhaps afraid to be seen still 'hanging around' this Jesus who had been executed for insurrection, for endangering Roman power in Judea.

Our gospel reading this morning begins in darkness, in sadness, in fear and confusion. Mary can't find Jesus and then there is lots of running! Mary runs to tell Peter and John. Peter and John run to the tomb. They run together and then it becomes almost a contest to see who can get there faster. Who can be first to see this empty tomb? Who can be first to see that Jesus is not there? How absurd to be running in order to see nothing. But darkness and grief and confusion cause us to do absurd things.

And what Peter and John see is really pretty much nothing: just the linen clothes that wrapped the body of Jesus. But those linen clothes, left neatly rolled up, and the cloth which had covered the head of Jesus are also a mystery. If someone had moved the body or even stolen the body they surely would not have taken time to unwrap it. If the body of Jesus had been moved or stolen, the clothes would have been taken too.

But in the face of this great mystery and Mary's distress and excitement, Peter and John do a very strange thing: they do nothing. They simply go home. Are they so filled with confusion that they can think of nothing else to do? Did they begin to think just a little bit that maybe what Jesus had said about his death and rising again could be true? We don't really know. We just know that they went home.

It is Mary who is willing to stay--- to persevere in her search. It is Mary who does not run--- she does not run away from her grief and sadness—she does not run away from the mystery of the

missing Jesus. She is willing to stay in the darkness, in the sadness, in the mystery of it all. And it is her perseverance and faithfulness which opens for her the possibility of meeting the risen Jesus.

Our gospel story this morning is really a story of movement..of moving from darkness, from sadness, from emptiness, from NOT knowing to light, to joy, to fullness.

Mary is searching for Jesus and she will not be satisfied with 'nothing'. She will not simply go home and return to her old life.

When she encounters the man she believes to be the gardener, she asks him, not once but twice to help her to find the body of Jesus. Mary is steadfast and determined, and yet she is still in darkness, still in the sadness of her tears, still in the emptiness of her loss.

It is only when this gardener calls her by name: Mary—that the light comes on. She hears the voice of her beloved Lord and Master and Teacher. Her darkness becomes light, her tears become joy, her emptiness becomes an overwhelming fullness and readiness for what comes next.

Mary doesn't simply go home. She hears the command of Jesus: 'go to my brothers... ' And Mary, this simple woman who had known the healing love of Jesus during his earthly life, becomes the one to proclaim publicly for the first time, NOT that Jesus is dead. But that death is dead.

Easter is for us the celebration that the powers of darkness, the power of all that is death dealing, all that sucks away life, the power of death itself is NOT stronger than the love of God in Jesus Christ. In Christ, death is dead, hope is reborn, our lives find fullness and purpose, our sadness becomes bearable and leads us to joy.

Our service this morning, begun in darkness and moving to the light of the Easter candle and our joyful singing, is a physical enactment of the message of Easter. The powers of darkness do not have the last word.

The last word is God calling each of us by name and leading us to light, to hope, to joy and purpose. The last word is God's kingdom sown as a seed in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, and flourishing and growing, and being publicly proclaimed in the words and actions of our lives, and in the lives of the millions of people who trust in God and order their lives according to his purposes.

'I shall not die, but live, and declare the works of the Lord', says the writer of Psalm 118 this morning.

'This is the day that the Lord has made. We will rejoice and be glad in it.'

Amen.

A sermon preached by Revd Canon Vickie Sims, All Saints' Anglican Church Milano, Sunday 21st April 2019 10.30 am Eucharist.