

Easter Day Year A (12 April 2020)

Lectionary Reading: Matthew 28:1-10



“This is the day the Lord has made, Let us rejoice and be glad in it,” so reads our opening sentence for this Easter Day.

Yet the reality is that in a world turned upside down by the Coronavirus pandemic, and self-isolation, social distancing, job and economic insecurity, illness and death an actuality for countless thousands of people, many will struggle to find a reason to rejoice today.

Last week I popped into a Christian Bookshop. As I was leaving I wished the staff a blessed and happy Easter. One person responded – “blessed yes, but happy no.”

I beg to disagree, you see, the story of Easter regardless of our situations never changes. It is the same story that commands our attention each Easter Day. The stone has been rolled away. The tomb is empty. He is not here. He is risen and goes ahead of you to Galilee – a story of great hope and great joy. Today’s account is from Matthew’s gospel.

There is something very special about Easter morning, dawning, like the two Mary’s, Mary Magdalen and the “other Mary” - and returning to the story we laid down, like Jesus’ body, on Good Friday.

Many of us will have relived Holy week and Good Friday in their footsteps as we listened to the words of Scripture, and, in prayer and action reengaged with the events of Jesus’ passion and crucifixion. And through Holy Saturday we have waited for this moment, when ‘after the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning’, we come.

This story becomes our story. We know something of the experience the women have been living through. I'm sure we have all known at one time or another what it is to be awake through the darkness of the night, just waiting for the first sign of morning so we can begin the day, because anything is better than waiting any longer feeling hopeless and helpless.

We have all known what it is to be kept awake by grief, by pain, by anger, disappointment, by anxiety and by fear. We know what it is to be kept awake by love: being up all night nursing a sick child; or sitting by the bedside of a loved one, holding their hand as death approaches. Worrying through the dark hours about having let someone down, about what could have been done differently, about 'if only'. We know what it is when dawn is a relief. When first light means we can get on and do something.

Perhaps it was after such a sleepless night that the two Mary's, who had looked on from a distance as Joseph of Arimathea placed Jesus' body in the tomb and rolled a great stone over the entrance, made their way back to the tomb. Not to anoint Jesus, Matthew tells us, but simply to watch, to observe, to hold vigil. Their devotion is clear, they were faithful to Jesus in his life, and in his death, and now even after his death.

And fear. There is plenty for the two Marys to be afraid of. Not only had they just watched their friend get crucified but they were there at the grave of a convicted political criminal. The guards posted at the tomb (a feature distinct to Matthew) could easily have reported the identities of any followers or supporters of this one whom they had killed and whose movement they now hoped to crush. The risk of the women is made even more dramatic by the realization that the rest of the disciples were all laying low. The men were hiding, paralysed by grief and fear.

At the same time, of the four gospel accounts, Matthew paints what is perhaps the most alarming and fear-inducing picture of the resurrection. First, there is the earthquake. Next, an angel of the Lord descends and rolls back the stone from the entrance to the tomb. The angel's appearance with a face like lightning and clothing white as snow, isn't just striking -- it's actually terrifying. Consequently, the guards at the tomb immediately faint in terror.

Plenty to fear. No wonder the angel first speaks words of comfort and courage to the women. “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised.”

Of course, it doesn't stop there, after the fear, and after the words of courage, comes a command: “Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.’ This is my message for you.” And they do. They come and see and then run and tell. And Matthew describes their obedience as a mixture of “fear and joy.”

What really strikes me when Matthew speaks of “fear and joy” is that the announcement of resurrection doesn't take away all their fear. Rather, it enables them to keep faith amid their fears, to do their duty and share their good news in spite of their anxiety. This is the very definition of courage. Courage is not the opposite of fear.

And, courage is exactly what Easter is about. The gospel enables us to keep our feet when life is difficult, and not just to persevere but even to grow and to flourish.

“Do not be afraid.” This charge -- repeated by Jesus when he encounters the women -- gives us insight into the very nature of our lives in this world. And there is, indeed, much to fear in a world being violently shaken by the coronavirus. By yesterday there were over 104 thousand deaths reported worldwide - it's almost incomprehensible. Global economies on the brink of collapse, millions of jobs lost, not to mention the psychological trauma to those unable to be present at the death of a loved one, or attend their funeral.

And yet the resurrection of Christ creates the possibility for joy and hope and courage and so much more, even in the midst of such uncertainty, pain and suffering. Why? Because it changes everything. The Christian author David Lose writes that “in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, we have God's promise that life is stronger than death, that love is greater than hate, that mercy overcomes judgment, and that all the sufferings and difficulties of this life are transient -- real and palpable and sometimes painful, for sure, but they do not have the last word and do not represent the final reality.”

In the end we have heard the resurrection promise that joy, hope, and faith will ultimately prevail.

These women, Mary Magdalene and the 'other Mary' the first to witness the empty tomb are not listed among the disciples nor named as apostles. But for their loving perseverance and courage, in their faithful following of Jesus to the bitter end and in the fulfilment of their commission to go and tell, they are both. For in their account is the news that confirms and completes the story of God's great love made known in Jesus.

Today they are the model for our Easter celebration. This Easter and beyond let us likewise be loving and courageous in telling our stories of God's love at work in our lives, especially perhaps when we have known grief or pain, anxiety or guilt, anger, disappointment or fear, and in joy, proclaim that Christ is risen alleluia, alleluia.