John 20:1-8 Easter Sunday Sermon during Covid 2021

Every year, on Easter Day, we read the story of the discovery of the resurrection in one of the gospel accounts. This year is no different. We’ve just read how Mary Magdalene saw that the stone which sealed the tomb had been removed and then we have the very personal account of how Peter, and presumably his friend John, raced to the tomb; we saw the fear of one and the audacity of the other; the belief of one at seeing the empty tomb and the wrappings described in detail for us. We are able to imagine the scene to an extent.

But this year, the thing from the story that hit me was Mary’s anguished statement, ‘They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.’ The plurality of her sentence – the ‘we’ – indicating how, like the other accounts say, Mary wasn’t alone but went with other women. The anguish she articulates is shared disaster. As Sister Wendy Beckett suggests, the one thing these women felt they could do for their beloved Jesus was to care for his body, and even that small service is now taken from them. There is therefore a mingling of despair for loss and grief, coupled with failure, bewilderment, the feeling of being robbed, and of their lives hitting a new low when they already thought they were at rock bottom. For them, Jesus had gone; and they didn’t know where.

Now, I know that you can all do for yourselves the imaginative work that I’m about to do. The last year in lockdown has scarred us all, some more than others. Covid has killed mercilessly, has torn our social fabric perhaps beyond repair in some places, and has shattered lives of people who are bereaved, lonely, anxious, jobless, now suffering another illness which may have been dealt with in non-Covid times. Many of us haven’t been able to say goodbye to friends or family who have died. Many of us now live with potentially life-long mental health consequences of the last year. Many of us have questioned our faith. Many others have questioned their atheism. We have all, together, been blindly stumbling on a steep rocky pass with a storm howling around us wishing we could get off but knowing that the path just keeps going.

For many of us therefore we can relate to Mary Magdelene’s anguish. Perhaps because we haven’t been able to care for our loved ones the way we needed to. Perhaps because we’ve been separated from the support network that we rely on. Perhaps because something has taken the enjoyment of our lives as we have always lived them, and we don’t know if, or when, we might get them back.

Perhaps we relate to Mary because in the middle of all of this, it feels like they have taken our Lord, and we don’t know where they have laid him.

For some of us, Jesus will have been more present to us over this last year. We’ve felt more carried and looked after than usual. Our prayers seem effective and despite not seeing people, we’ve never felt alone because we’ve known that God is with us.

For others, though, we are still, even this morning, wondering where God is? Why it feels like even in the darkest places, the tomb of our experiences, Jesus is not there? And if not there, where is he?

If that’s you, maybe today is the day to admit it to yourself and to God – today, Lord Jesus, it feels like someone has taken you out of even the darkest parts of my life and my experience and I don’t know where you are or how to find you.

The irony is that on Easter Day, in our reading, Jesus is missing…

But grave robbery or politically-sanctioned body-snatching, it is not. The main character is missing, not because he has been hidden somewhere else – but instead, it is precisely because the place he was laid, in the death of a tomb, could not hold him.

Mary finds Peter and John and they run to the tomb and find no body either. What they do find is grave linens – and we get a really detailed description of them compared to much of the gospel narratives. There are the body wrappings left lying, but then the cloth piece for the head separately rolled up neatly and left. This isn’t like the Lazarus account a few chapters before when we get a farcical picture of a raised Lazarus stumbling out of the grave still semi-wrapped up and looking like a Scooby-Doo villain! Instead, there is the sense from the wrappings that the body is no longer there, the grave wrap couldn’t hold Jesus. And then the sense from the head piece that perhaps Jesus himself rolled it up neatly and placed it down as he wouldn’t be needing it after all.

The absence of Jesus, a source of anguish and misery, is transformed into an absence that signified a miracle.

In the accounts that follow, most people, including famously Thomas, believed because they saw the risen Jesus. But on this Easter morning, John sees the wrapped grave clothes and believed. There, in the darkness that was so scary that he dares not enter by himself, John finally understood that the absence of Jesus in the tomb meant the presence of Jesus elsewhere.

Obviously, the story moves on from there and Jesus is seen by so many people, and the basis of our Christian faith is that Jesus is alive, having conquered death, and now prays for us at God the Father’s right hand, with his Holy Spirit come to live around, within, and between us. But I want to stay with the empty tomb for a moment.

The absence of Jesus in the tomb, the place of the dead, means his presence in the world of the living. His conquering of death means the hope of life for him and for all his followers.

But for John, in a gloomy tomb cut into the rock, following days of agonising grief, with nothing to show for it except for some discarded and rolled grave linens, this was the difference between fear and faith. For John, the tomb was a place of unnatural fear, but now that he understood and believed, the dawn began to break upon his life and his imagination. Jesus was risen – so of course he wasn’t there! Jesus was risen so all those other things he did and said weren’t lost. Jesus was risen and so there was hope for John.

In the despairing gloomy darkness of Covid, we may well relate to Mary’s anguished questioning where they have taken our Lord? Where is he?

In response, we have John’s experience. The tomb is empty. Jesus isn’t there. A miracle has happened. The world has changed. A day has dawned. Faith is possible in a living Lord. The face covering linen has been rolled up and discarded because it is no longer needed as death is no longer the end. Decay is not the last word. Rays of hope shine into the depths of the tomb, as Jesus, no longer among the dead, is alive.

If you are the person who feels like Jesus has been taken out of the darkest and most tomblike parts of your experience and you can’t find him no matter how much you pray or seek – then today’s reading isn’t about trying to run around and meet the living Jesus: if the Gospels are anything to go by, he’ll turn up where you don’t expect it anyway! If this is you, then perhaps within this darkness you feel, you need to find the empty grave linens – those signs that show the resurrected Jesus is alive and available, and that he has left neatly rolled cloths for you to find. Jesus’s disappearance from the tomb isn’t that Covid, or anything else has robbed you of your Lord. Instead, the neatly rolled cloths show you that Jesus isn’t dead. God isn’t gone. Life has returned. Faith is possible. There may still be darkness, and it may be that you don’t know where Jesus is quite yet; but everything doesn’t end in death. A miracle has happened and so even if you can’t see him yet, Jesus is alive, available and he loves you. John believed before Jesus turned up, whilst still standing in the cold, dark grave. The wrappings were enough for him, and they can also be enough for us.

Christ is risen indeed. Amen.