

Easter Day 8.00am Holy Communion

Acts 10.34-43, Mark 16.1-8

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts, be now and always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

In our familiarity with the Easter story, we perhaps don't realise what a traumatic and dangerous time it was for all those involved. The disciples and the others who followed Jesus had just seen him arrested and executed, they had lost a close friend and one on whom they had built all their hopes and expectations. And now they were in considerable danger themselves. Most of the disciples had run away after Jesus' arrest and whilst Peter had hung around, he was ultimately to deny that he knew Jesus. But there were some notable acts of bravery – Mary had refused to leave her son of course, and the apostle John, at some risk to himself, remained with her. Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, both high status members of the Jerusalem establishment, asked for Jesus' body, took it down from the cross and hurriedly prepared it for burial before putting it in a tomb before the sabbath began, again at some personal risk to themselves, at least in reputational terms. And then there were the women who had followed Jesus from Galilee, and who had supported him and the small band of disciples out of their own resources. There were a number of such women, including, confusingly, several with the name Mary, and each gospel writer names just two or three. But we do know that they watched the crucifixion from afar and they saw Jesus being laid in the tomb by Joseph and Nicodemus. We often talk of the love of God for humanity, but here we see the human love at its most profound. From the Song of Solomon

Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it.

We can only imagine what these women would have been going through in the period between Jesus' death on Good Friday and when we see them on the Sunday morning. They would have been overwhelmed by grief, perhaps panicked by the danger that they were in, numbed by all the events they had seen. I doubt they slept on the Friday night and the day of forced Sabbath inactivity on the Saturday must have been very difficult. As soon as the Sabbath was over, at sunset on Saturday evening, Mark tells us they went to buy the spices for anointing Jesus and preparing his body for burial. This had already been done by Joseph and Nicodemus of course, but perhaps they were too far away to have seen this – or perhaps because they thought that being men, they couldn't possibly have done it properly. But having made the purchases, another restless and sleepless night would have followed, before they were finally able to go to the tomb when it was becoming light.

And on the way, still no doubt in a state of confusion and trauma, they realised that they had no plan for removing the stone from the front of the tomb – perhaps they should have dragged along one or two of the male disciples with them.

They needn't have worried of course. The stone had been removed by the time they arrived, and in the tomb, they found a young man, clothed in white, almost the uniform of an angel, who told them that Jesus was risen, and that they were to tell the disciples, and in particular Peter. And at that, their terror overcame them and they ran – fear seems to

be the natural emotion when faced with an angel in scripture. Who knows what happened to the spices they were carrying – did they just drop them? But we are told they ran away and told nobody what had happened.

And at that point Mark's gospel ends.

Sometime in the first or second century, some readers of the gospel decided that this just wasn't a satisfactory ending, and additions were made – something of a hotchpotch of post resurrection events from other gospels, that clearly weren't written by Mark. But why did the gospel end here? Some have argued that the scroll on which it was written was damaged and the last part of the gospel lost. But I would incline to the view that this is precisely how Mark intended the gospel to finish. Now, it is fairly certain that, in writing the gospel, Mark drew mainly on the testimony of Peter, and indeed in the gospel he is both the first and the last disciple named – apparently a literary convention that denotes the testimony of an eyewitness. But at the point that the gospel reaches, Peter's story had in fact, in some sense come to an end. He had described the events of Jesus' ministry, witnessed by a small group of people, in a restricted geographical region, and these events became focussed on just one person, at one place and at one time – Jesus on the cross – perhaps the focus of all human history. But things were about to change. We know from the other gospels what happened in the immediate aftermath of the angel's message to the women. At least one of the women overcame her terror and told the disciples what had happened, Mary Magdalen presumably. Peter and John had run to the tomb, and looked in, Jesus had appeared to Mary, and then to others of his followers in and around Jerusalem, including Peter and those walking to Emmaus. The story of Jesus was now becoming such that it couldn't be told by just one person. Peter still had a role of course in the events that were to follow, but now Jesus wasn't confined to one location at one time and his story had to be experienced and told by many others. So, Peter's own story of the life of Jesus came to an end at the point where Mark finished his gospel.

And the story continued of course – through the events of Pentecost and the growth of the early church, as the message of Jesus spread across the world over the centuries. And as it spread, his followers began to realise more and more what his death and resurrection actually meant. We heard today in the reading from the Acts of the Apostles, an early sermon of Peter, in which he speaks of the sacrifice of Jesus as leading to the forgiveness of sins, of reconciliation with God, and that was and remains the primary meaning of what happened at Calvary. But there was so much more – as the years passed the followers of Jesus realised there were other meaning – that on the cross evil and death had been defeated. The apostle John was to write

For this purpose, Christ was revealed, to destroy all the works of the evil one.

In his early ministry, we see Jesus confronting Satan – at his temptation, when Peter was used after the transfiguration to try to dissuade him from going to Jerusalem, and in the cross we see the final confrontation in which he emerged victorious. The works of the evil one were defeated. Through the resurrection *"the gate of heaven was opened to all believers"* and in Jesus we see the depth of the love of God for his world and for his people. In perhaps the best known verse in the gospels we read

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him, should not die but have eternal life.

And the story continues of course – with us being part of it. God's offer of forgiveness through the sacrifice of Jesus still stands; in this world in all its turmoil, we can still know that evil has been defeated. And most of all we can be certain in the hope that we can follow the resurrected Jesus to life beyond the grave in the everlasting presence of God.

And so in ending we return to the words of the Song of Solomon, taken through the centuries as the voice of Jesus calling to his church, his people, his beloved, calling to us this rather grey spring morning to follow him, to accept his forgiveness and the hope he gives for the future..

Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away; for now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come. Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.