

St John's Catford

Easter Day 2021

John 20:1-18

As human beings we all like a good story. And we all know what the main ingredients of a good story are, don't we?

A beginning, a middle and an end.

Things in life however are rarely so simple, and yet we still like to try to impose a narrative on things.

It is very tempting as a preacher to draw a link between the last year and the Easter story, and to speak about how, a year ago, we were not able to be together in church, but that after a year of trials, illness, and even death, we are now experiencing

something of the resurrection in being able to worship and celebrate together again.

That is all true, but on its own would be too simple.

For one thing, while things are clearly a lot better, we are not all here – many still do not feel safe being here; or perhaps don't want to be without Children's Church or being able to sing together.

And many in our country are of course still contracting the virus, as we watch a third wave hitting Europe.

Don't get me wrong, it is right to be optimistic, and to celebrate joyfully today, but when we hear the typical fairy tale ending, '*And they lived happily ever after*', who else wonders what *really* happens next? There is a reason sequels are so popular.

And it is the same in our Easter gospel.

We may think that after the awfulness of Jesus's suffering and death, which we have marked over the last week, we are now celebrating the happy ending of the story: His resurrection.

The end.

But that is not the case for two reasons:

Firstly because, at the same time as the various individual realisations of what has happened – something too wonderful to strike each of our characters in the same way – there is panic; there is confusion.

And secondly, because there is not actually a lot of resolution at the end of our story – partly because what seemed like an ending, turns out to be a new

beginning, in lots of different ways, but also because people's lives carry on.

So even in their Easter joy, things aren't all tied up neatly, as in a fairy tale.

Firstly, we have Mary, finding the stone rolled away. She then runs to tell Peter and the one called the Beloved Disciple, traditionally identified as John.

They run to the tomb. The Beloved Disciple arrives first, but does not go in.

Peter arrives, and crouches down to go inside the low opening in the rock, and there he sees the grave clothes lying there, folded.

No grave robbers would have been so careful.

We learn nothing of Peter's reaction.

The Beloved Disciple then goes in; and we are simply told: '*He saw and believed.*'

Why did Peter not have that reaction? Who knows? But these are real, flesh and blood people, and of course they react differently from one another.

Meanwhile, Mary Magdalene is outside, weeping.

She waits for the men to depart, till she is left alone; and then she peers in. She who found the empty tomb first, looks in last.

She does not see the empty grave clothes that Peter saw, but two angels where His body lay, and indeed in the precise places where those two cloths had lain.

We can tell the state she's in. Though it should be clear to her by now that this is no ordinary grave robbery, she repeats the mantra that she has been shouting in her grief-stricken state: '*They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.*' Who does she think might have taken Him away, given that there are now angels where He lay? She cannot see or think straight.

Even when she sees Jesus, she supposes that He is the gardener, turns, and still with the same initial thought fixed in her head, she asks: '*Sir, if you have*

carried Him away, tell me where you have laid Him, and I will take Him away.'

We're now near the end of our gospel passage, and the tone is *still* one of heart-rending, mind-altering grief, though we of course are in on the secret. We know that Jesus is risen, and that the Beloved Disciple has seen and believed.

But our narrator, traditionally that very same Beloved Disciple, takes our attention back to Mary Magdalene, who does not yet know this greatest of truths.

But in our gospel passage, the frenzy, the panic and the grief, all change with one word: *'Mary.'*

She turns again. But now, in a moment, instead of tense, awful, mindless grief, comes calm. Peace. Simply after hearing her name from the lips of Jesus.

We've already had a hint that we're in a garden, though now the imagery is more pastoral. Jesus has told us before that He is the Good Shepherd; He knows His sheep by name, and they - we - respond to the sound of His voice.

Mary saw the gardener, but now she hears Jesus's voice calling her by name, and she knows that she is safe, and that all is well.

But this is not the ordinary peace that might come after a period of worry. In finding Jesus risen, in the garden, and in His calling her by name, not only is

her existence transformed, but in being the first to encounter the risen Jesus, all of humankind, and indeed, all of *creation* is transformed, and forever.

There's another garden in which God once walked abroad, in the evening. But that appearance brought fear from the first man and woman, who had just disobeyed Him, committing the first sin.

Now however, God walks in the garden in the early hours of the *morning*, at four or five, just before dawn. And as God created Eden, so Christ creates anew in that morning, in *this* morning.

And because of his word to Mary, and his appearance to her and to the disciples after her, we

know, as Mary Magdalene did, that all is well, and that all shall be well.

As human beings, as I said earlier, we like to have things tied up.

If only I got that job.

If only I could get that benefit.

If only I could meet the perfect person.

If only I won the lottery.

If only the lockdown would end.

If only social distancing would end.

If only, if only, if only, then, then, THEN, everything will be alright.

And of course, that time never comes. Or the individual thing might, but then there is always something else that we start to dream of having.

We as Christians should however be different from that.

'Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.'

And yet, we do not learn.

Our deepest satisfaction should not in fact depend on defeating the virus, or on the hope we place in social distancing ending at some unidentified point in the future, nice as that would be.

But, in the midst of the troubles of this world, it should depend on the risen Lord just gently saying our name. Rather than 'Mary', try hearing Jesus saying *your* name.

Not telling you there will be a point at which all your problems will be over. But that He is with you, calling you.

Because *that* is all you need. Your story, and Jesus's story, does not end with His resurrection. The resurrection is just part of the story, which will continue in His ascension and His sending of His Spirit on the Church.

But the resurrection of Jesus should infuse everything we do, and our attitude to everything we face in this world.

We are an Easter people, a people of this day, of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, for whom we live, and in whom we have our being.

All our troubles may not be over, just as they were not for St Peter, the Beloved Disciple or for Mary Magdalene. And indeed, they cannot be in this life.

But, we believe that this earthly life is nevertheless transformed forever by Jesus's defeat of death and the powers of darkness.

And we too shout with Mary, whatever we face, '*I have seen the Lord.*'

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!