

“TRANSFORMATION”
John 20:1-23; Colossians 2:6-19

What are we celebrating here this morning? What do we celebrate whenever we come together to worship God? What are the tales of God in the Old Testament all about? What fills the preaching and poetry of the Hebrew prophets? What is at the heart of the gospel stories about Jesus? What is the message that Christians have to share with the community around them in their words and their actions? Just one word that gets right to the heart of what we believe – **transformation**. Through Jesus, God changes things, transforms things. He reminds us that what we see around us is not the ultimate reality: we do not have to put up with things as they are. There is an alternative.

On Sunday mornings here we have been looking at the story of Jesus as Mark tells it and we've seen that Jesus has come to announce a radical new agenda. He has come to offer a different way to look at the world, a transformed perspective on life. After encountering Jesus, people are never the same again. Throughout his life, Jesus transformed people and situations – by his words, by his healings, by his miracles. And even beyond death, Jesus brings transformation. We don't have a great deal of time available to us this morning, but I just want to point out a few ways in which Jesus brought transformation in the story of that first Easter day. Think back to the story we heard read earlier in the service – John's version of the events of Easter Sunday.

Firstly, in Mary's situation, **bewilderment changed to recognition**. There was Mary, one of Jesus' closest friends. She loved him and desperately wanted all that he'd promised her to be true. He had spoken of new beginnings and forgiven sins, of a hope for the future and a world of amazing opportunities. And she had believed him. She had accepted it all and devoted her life to following him. Now all that is lying in tatters. This man who claimed to be the Messiah, who promised so much, who seemed invincible and pretty well superhuman, had been tied up by Roman soldiers, mocked by her own priests and leaders, and nailed up on a wooden cross to die. She'd seen his body twisting and twitching in the fierce Middle Eastern sun. She'd heard his scream of anguish as he'd died and she'd seen his body buried in a tomb for good and all.

Now she was back at the tomb to do the stuff she didn't have time to do on the Sabbath – tidy him up, embalm him, make him look respectable in death. And the body's disappeared. After all the emotion and trauma of Friday, there's now another crisis to face. Jesus has died – and now he's disappeared. And in the emptied tomb there are a couple of weird-looking blokes who want to know why she's crying. *Why's she crying?* She's crying because her whole world has fallen apart. She doesn't know what's happened or what's going to happen. She's alone in the garden graveyard and nothing is going as it should. So she

turns to walk out of the tomb and through her tears sees a figure silhouetted against the rising sun. Maybe the gardener. Maybe someone who can tell her what's going on. So she asks him. And from the silhouette comes the simple word, "Mary". The voice is comfortingly familiar and as she walks out into the sunshine and he too turns so that the sun catches his face, she knows it's him. The confusion and bewilderment gives way to recognition. It's Jesus. It really is Jesus.

And as the penny drops, as recognition dawns, so her **sorrow changed to joy**. The deep, dark, draining sorrow of the last forty-eight hours seeps away and she cries out in excitement, "Rabboni" – "My Master". She grabs hold of him so that he can never get away again, a hug so tight, so desperate that Jesus has to say, "Don't cling to me like that". But he's alive – just as he said he would be. It was true. Against all odds, against all received wisdom, against every human expectation – Jesus is alive. And he continues to transform.

Later that day, as the rest of Jesus' friends are gathered together in an upstairs room, mulling over the events of the day, trying to make sense of what Mary has told them, anxious about what the future holds for them, Jesus suddenly turns up himself. Their **anxiety changed to peace**. Jesus turns up and speaks words of peace, breaths his own Spirit on them and transforms their situation. He's there, with them, among them, real for them. And from that time on they know that it's going to be alright, they find themselves changed from weak, worrying, hesitant followers to men and women who themselves will change the world.

Listen, you and I are followers of that same Jesus Christ. We are touched by that same Holy Spirit. We can know that same transformation – and proclaim that transformation by our own lives. We all face times of bewilderment, sorrow, anxiety – we're human, after all. But Jesus comes to us in those situations and, as we recognise him, offers us the opportunity to know joy and peace. And the reason he can do that is because of the ultimate transformation that he was involved in – **death changed into life**. Jesus died – no doubt about that. You don't get crucified and survive. But he was brought back to life, too – no doubt about that as far as I'm concerned. There is just too much evidence to support that pioneering miracle.

I say "pioneering", because that's what it was. Jesus was the first to go through death and out the other side – and we can follow him. He blazed the trail that you and I can also tread. As we recognise Jesus, as we accept who he is and what he offers, as we – however falteringly – declare our trust in him, as we get to know him through the pages of the Bible, through the words and lives of others, through the inner activity of his Holy Spirit, so we too move, as it were, from death to life. We find our lives transformed as radically as if we had died and come back to life.

St Paul, who wrote much of the rest of the New Testament, puts it like this in a letter he wrote to a group of Christians in Colosse and he links it to what we're doing here this morning, to baptism (*Colossians 2:11-14 – The Message*). You see, what Erik is about to do is all about that transformation. Of course, the water is a potent symbol of cleansing. Water is what we use to wash away dirt and here it is symbolic of washing away all those things that spoil our lives – sin, wrong choices, wrong decisions, unhelpful patterns of behaviour, selfish attitudes. This water is nothing special – it came out of the tap in the house next door – but it's a symbol.

And it's such a big tub because Erik is going to go right under the water – a symbol again. It's a symbol of transformation, of dying, being buried as he goes down under the water. The old life is over with. All those wrong things have been put to death – and forgiven and forgotten by God. Then he'll come up again (we hope!), just like the resurrection, just like Jesus rising from the dead – a symbol of a new start, a new approach to life. It's a transformation, a radical change. A transformation of his **whole** life: that's why his **whole** body goes under the water.

Now, as I say, that's a symbol. The transformation doesn't happen today. It's a sign of something that has already happened – the outward sign of an inward change. But it's nonetheless real. And that reality can be a part of your life too. Maybe you've never really thought about Jesus as an agent of change in your life, as a bringer of transformation. But just as he changed the lives of so many others when he was here on earth, just as he has changed the lives of millions of people down through the centuries, just as he has transformed situations and attitudes for two millennia, so he can do that today.

How do you respond to that? Are you just going to walk away and forget about it? That's your decision. Do you want to think about it a bit more and ask some questions? Try one of our Alpha groups which are set up just for that. Do you want to say this morning, "Jesus, transform me"? If you do, don't go home without doing something about it.