

“I HAVE SEEN THE LORD!”

John 20:1-18

Easter Sunday – for us a day of celebration and rejoicing. Without it, we have nothing, really, to believe in – Jesus would be simply another teacher who said some good stuff, did some exemplary things, but ultimately failed to achieve all that his teaching suggested he would. So we have praised God this morning for the amazing story of Jesus’ return from death. We have built on two thousand years of faith and tradition to worship our Risen Lord. Our lives are different because of what we believe about that day. It’s the very foundation of all our hope for the future, in this life and beyond.

Easter Sunday – for Mary of Magdala it started off as a day of despair, but became a day of transformation. John gives us no information about her other than her name and the fact that she was among the first to the tomb on that amazing morning. The other gospel writers have filled us in on her past – a woman who had the reputation of being a prostitute, who had been possessed by demons, who had outraged public opinion by her extravagant behaviour towards Jesus. She was a woman whose life had been changed through her encounters with Jesus: she saw him as someone who cared about her whatever her situation, who loved her for who she was, and who saw in her what she could become. She had become devoted to this wandering teacher and had believed all that he told her about her potential. She had followed him down to Jerusalem. She had watched him die – and even in death she now wanted to show her love for him.

And John writes her into his account of the resurrection, putting her at the very heart of it. Her story dances with that of Jesus as the twists and turns of this world-changing morning play out towards their astonishing climax. The story of Mary Magdalene could be the story of many of us – indeed, many of us may well identify with the way it moves along. And for others of you here today, you may just be waiting for the last bits to fall into place for you. Let’s follow John’s account and see if it connects with us this morning.

The end of chapter 19 sees Jesus laid in the nearby tomb (19:42). After his three-year ministry, his teaching and preaching, miracles and healing, after the debates and discussions, the battles with the religious and political establishments, after the hope and the passion, Jesus has been captured, tried and executed. His vision of the Kingdom of God breaking in on earth, of which he has provided so many tantalising glimpses in his own life, has turned to dust. For many of those who heard him he has become simply another hawker of dreams, another charlatan promising much and delivering little. For those who were closest to him, his ignominious death – without any attempt to avoid it – has brought down the curtain on three wasted years of their lives. They’ve missed all the clues in his teaching. They’ve been unable to believe that anything else will happen. And the battered, bruised and broken body of their teacher has been left in a borrowed tomb.

Amongst those who were most upset was Mary Magdalene. She’d found in Jesus a person who cared about her and for her – a man who didn’t want her for her body, a man who didn’t discard her after their first meeting. He had transformed her life, filled her with hope, restored her self-esteem and given her a reason to live. Now that reason had evaporated with the dying breath of her Saviour. She’d watched him die, seen him buried, and resigned herself to the idea that it was all over. All she could do now was try her best to ensure that he had a decent burial. The body had been laid in the tomb a couple of days before and left because of the Sabbath. Now she could come and clean him up, anoint him with some spices and leave him to the darkness of death.

But during those two days something had happened, something that no-one was expecting because it had never happened like this before. Jesus had left the tomb. Somehow, in a way that has baffled scholars and teachers, preachers and disciples for two millennia, Jesus had been restored to life. We don’t know how it had happened, but we believe it did. Jesus was alive. Jesus had strode from that tomb as if nothing had ever happened, although he’d kept the scars on his hands, feet and side, just in case anyone tried to say that nothing had ever happened. We don’t know at which point the tomb had been blown

open, nor what Jesus had been doing since then, but he was no longer where they'd put him. The tomb was empty of all but a folded shroud.

And that's what Mary found – a tomb with the great stone slab slid away and no body in it. Her sadness turned to bewilderment. Where was the body? What sick joke was this? What sacrilege had been committed? Remember how outraged we were when Gladys Hammond's body was taken from her grave in Yoxall by four animal rights activists back in 2004 – and we didn't even know her! It was another cruel twist in the story of this man's life and death. Her emotions were in tatters. Even the good she thought she could do in embalming his body was now denied her. Her reluctant acceptance of his death was now thrown into further turmoil by the disappearance of his body. She went and told the others what had happened and then returned to the tomb after Peter and John had looked in. They'd now gone off home, and she just stood there and wept.

And as she peered into the tomb she saw these two white-robed messengers who simply asked her what the fuss was all about – typical men! They ask her who she's looking for, as if it wasn't obvious. She turns away in frustration and catches sight of another figure, silhouetted against the morning sun, his outline blurred by her tears. She blurts out her desperate plea for information. What has he done with the body? Where is it? She wants to go and find it, to bring it back to its resting place. Just tell her where it is – and why.

But the man, the gardener, the keeper of the tomb, the local official – whoever he is – doesn't tell her. He simply speaks her name – “*Mary*”. Out of the blinding sun, through the burning tears, into her sobbing soul comes the simple word that means he knows her. She recognises the voice first, then wipes her eyes, lifts her head and sees the face clearly. It's him! It's Jesus. Here, in the most unexpected of places, at the most unexpected time, Mary sees Jesus. He should be inside the tomb. He should be lying still and lifeless on the stone slab, but here he is in the morning sunshine – standing, breathing, speaking: speaking to her!

The emotional roller-coaster takes another turn. In the past few days hope has turned to sadness, sadness to frustration, frustration to despair, despair to desolation, desolation to bewilderment – and now bewilderment to utter, utter joy. Mary is looking at her Saviour, her Lord, her friend – and he is speaking to her. Can you imagine the relief? Can you sense her rejoicing? Can you catch something of the reassurance she has received in that simple mention of her name?

Where do you find yourself now? Where are you on that emotional roller-coaster that really marks out all our lives? For some of us the ups and downs are steep and sudden. For others they are more gentle and shallow. But we all find ourselves struggling at times to know quite what's coming next. Can you hear Jesus speaking your name this morning? He is alive – even though you may have thought he'd disappeared. He's wanting to let you know he's there and he cares for you.

And this is perhaps where you'd expect him to be – church is the place where you'd look for him usually. But Jesus still speaks to us in the unexpected places. As we plod through the routine of our weekly work, as we find ourselves doing things we hadn't bargained for, as we find ourselves dumped in all kinds of crises that life leads us into – there, again and again, we can encounter Jesus. As Jesus speaks to us – through other people, through his word, in the stillness of thought and prayer, as his Holy Spirit calls out in our preoccupations and anxieties – however it happens, we find reassurance and comfort. If in nothing else we find it in the fact that he is there, alive and loving us.

And there's Mary – her tears of sadness transformed into tears of joy. She wants to hug him, to feel that it's really him (although she has no doubts now), but he tells her that she's not to cling to him just yet. Jesus has other work for her to do. Mary Magdalene, a woman – a woman despised by many – is told by Jesus to go and let the others know that things are back on track. Her unexpected encounter with the Risen Lord Jesus leads her to tell others about it. Jesus' commission is for her to be his witness – the very first witness of his resurrection. She doesn't stop ask how it happened. She doesn't ask for all the details

of how he left the tomb – a shame, in some ways, as it would have cleared up a lot of questions in the two thousand years that followed. She just knows he’s alive, that he’s made a difference to her life, and that she’s just got to tell everyone else. As we read in the other gospels, even the other disciples didn’t believe the women at first, but that didn’t stop the women telling them.

The Risen Jesus speaks to us still – reassuring, rehabilitating, renewing, resourcing – and he simply wants us to go and tell others, “*I have seen the Lord!*”. Jesus can transform our lives as we hear his voice, and he wants other people to know about that. How about it? Who are you going to tell this week that you have encountered Jesus?