

SERMON PREACHED AT ST ANDREW'S WALKERVILLE, SUNDAY APRIL 16 (Easter Day).
MATTHEW 28:1 - 10.

Preached by the Reverend Helen Gibson-White – Associate Priest

Early in the morning, John says, “while it was still dark.’ When I read these words I feel that I am about to hear an announcement of an event that could change the whole human situation. “Early in the morning while it was still dark, the women came to the tomb.” It would have been an eerie feeling, that walking in the dark streets on the way to find a dead body – and how did they possibly imagine that they could move the stone?

The authorities knew that Jesus had said he would rise after three days. They did not imagine that this could be true, but they did think that the disciples might try to remove the body and claim that Jesus had risen. They wanted to take steps to guard the tomb, so the tomb was sealed by a great round stone which ran in a groove, and then they set a guard, making it as secure as possible.

How could two women possibly gain entry in to the tomb? Even if they had queried how they would do it, extreme grief and great love can stop us thinking logically. All they were intent on was offering the gift of love – “how” probably did not occupy their thoughts.

No one in that little corner of the Roman Empire would have had any idea of the significance of what had happened, an event that would divide history into “before” and “after”. It was hard at first for Jesus’ followers to believe – but how about the others who had witnessed the crucifixion? *Many of them may have believed, but could they rejoice?*

The chief priests and Pharisees were afraid. What would the consequences be for them if Jesus had been raised from the dead? Their power and influence would be challenged, and maybe come to an end. They could believe, but they could not rejoice. The guards at the tomb were so terrified, not only by the angels in Matthew’s account of the resurrection, but by the thought of the consequences if they were accused of sleeping while in duty, that they “shook and became like dead men.” *They could believe, but they could not rejoice.*

The guards at the tomb were so terrified, not only by the angels in Matthew’s Gospel account of the resurrection, but also by the thought of the consequences to themselves if they were accused of sleeping while on duty, that they “shook and became like dead men.” *They could believe, but they could not rejoice.*

And the women, Mary Magdalene and “the other Mary.” There are many Mary’s in the gospel record: Mary of Magdala (a.k.a. Mary Magdalene), the Mary who washed Jesus’ feet and dried them with her hair; Mary who anointed Jesus with the expensive perfume; Mary who was the sister of Martha and Lazarus of Bethany. Apart from Jesus’ mother Mary, are the other “Mary accounts” accounts of the same person? We do not know and there is no point in speculation ... but we can be sure of some things. The Mary’s who stood by Jesus when he was on the cross until he died were courageous. It would have been a ghastly thing to witness, and they were faithful to the end. They believed in the resurrection – and they rejoiced – maybe Mary Magdalene rejoiced particularly as she thought back over her life.

It is likely that her life had been one of hard knocks ... sorrows, disappointments, dashed hopes, perhaps personal tragedy ... things that could have caused her to deviate in some way from the accepted standards of the community, or caused people to say that she had seven devils. If she was shunned by her community, maybe she felt it didn't matter if she threw her life away. But then along came someone who accepted her, made her feel her best and her worst simultaneously, who understood and forgave her as no-one else had, who healed and freed her to begin to become a real person. Out of gratitude for the break with the old ways and the fresh start Jesus had given her, *she could believe and rejoice*.

The account of the trial, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus occupy a major part of each of the gospels, underlining that this is the central fact of the Christian faith – Christ is risen from the dead! They differ only in minor details, which makes the accounts very natural and human. If we were all to witness the same event, without doubt we would differ in details that particularly impressed us, and this would in no way alter the truth of the account.

Matthew's gospel says that Jesus met the two Mary's with the word, "Greetings." Because we have been thinking in particular of Mary Magdalene and how she could believe and rejoice, I turn to John's gospel account of the resurrection. Mary Magdalene went to the tomb, saw that the stone was removed and ran to tell Peter and John. In his commentary William Barclay points out that it is illuminating that she ran to Peter. In spite of his denial of Jesus, it appears that he is still seen as the leader of the group of disciples. In spite of his weakness and cowardice when Jesus was arrested, there was something about him that enabled the others to accept him as leader. He and John went to the tomb, found it as Mary had said, and returned home. There is no record of what they said. Apparently they went and left Mary alone because, the account says, Peter and John still did not understand from scripture that Jesus would rise from the dead. *They would soon believe and rejoice*, but now, perhaps, it seemed too good to be true, something totally outside all experience ... totally incomprehensible. Mary Magdalene is a great example of someone who remains faithful when she could not understand.

Sometimes we are called to do that, to go on in our love for God when we may be in circumstances we can't understand; to know he is with us and to have faith in his good purpose.

While Mary Magdalene is left alone, weeping, Jesus stands with her. "Why are you crying?" he asks, "Who are you looking for?" She thinks Jesus is the gardener. "If you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him and I will get him" she says.

Again, as with moving the stone, it may be that her extreme grief is preventing her from thinking logically. How could she, a woman on her own, manage to carry Jesus' body; and even if she could, where would she take it?

Jesus said one word. "Mary." This has been called the greatest recognition scene ever recorded.

Have you had the experience of someone saying your name with an inflection or tone that brings a sudden feeling of joy ... of being enlivened?

In calling her name Jesus gave back to Mary Magdalene all that she thought she had lost – her self-respect, her very life, the lifting of the dark cloud that had hung over her for so long. That one word changed everything. She was back to the new life Jesus had given her; and not only back to a new life, but she was presented with new and even greater possibilities. She returned to the disciples with the wonderful news, “I have seen the Lord!” and she became the first witness to the resurrection.

In Arthur Schultz’s book *Deeper Into John’s Gospel* he writes, “I hear someone calling my name and asking what am I looking for, and I would know that voice anywhere. Mary did not find Jesus - he found Mary. I didn’t find Jesus – he finds me. The gospel isn’t seeking and finding, it’s sought and found. God left the tomb and went out into the garden and the streets, into homes and into senate chambers, into schools, hospitals and prisons, always on the move towards us.”

Mary cried, “Rabboni” – “Teacher”, and we can imagine how fast she ran from the garden to tell the disciples, “I have seen the Lord.” To see him means to understand that we haven’t plumbed all the resources of the world when we come to the end of human wisdom and understanding. “There’s more to life than meets the eye,” Schultz continues. “We do not live in a closed, self-contained universe, but in one through which the winds of eternity blow.”

Arthur Schultz goes on to explain how, over years, and through many different experiences, his religion changed from something learned into an inner experience of God who lives and freed his spirit, and through it all he felt God holding him together and holding him up. “It’s not my hold on God,” he says, “but his hold on me that has mattered most these last years.”

We have travelled with Jesus this (holy) week, from his entry into Jerusalem, to the institution of Holy Communion in the Last Supper, to his arrest, trial and crucifixion on Good Friday. We have entered into these events as best we can, and now we have arrived at the empty tomb. It may be good if we, too, like Mary Magdalene and the others, are a little afraid – not with an inhibiting fear, but with awe, as the realisation of what God has done for us dawns on us more and more. He has won the victory over sin and death, and they no longer have the last word.

We know only too well the violence and distress that are in the world. Our Easter faith is not that the world is different from what it is, but that we are a community of the resurrection here and now, with the One who says with realism and confidence, “Fear not, I have overcome the world.”

When the apostles began to preach they gave a startling message: the beginning of a new era. Behind this belief was the fact of the resurrection, that he of whom they spoke was alive for evermore. They were not preoccupied with wondering how it had happened. It was the mighty act of God, a mystery but also wonderfully concrete.

“Mary,” Jesus said, and Mary Magdalene could then say, “I have seen the Lord.”

Substitute your name for hers and hear Jesus ask you, “What are you seeking? Who are you looking for?” Then you can say, “I have seen the Lord!”