

EASTER DAY

9 APRIL 2023

The Acts of the Apostles 10. 34-43

Psalm 118. 1-2, 14-24

Colossians 3. 1-4

Gospel: Matthew 28. 1-10

Matthew tells us that Mary Magdalene and the other Mary go to see the tomb on the morning after the Sabbath. It is the two of them who are there at the crucifixion, and it is the two of them who are there when the stone is rolled over the entrance to the tomb. It is the two of them who go again to the tomb on that first day of the week as it is dawning. Faithful. Present. Watchful. Devoted. They attend to this space of terrible loss. They are not scattered sheep, but they remain present even when the darkness has descended to erase their friend, teacher and master.

These two women are the first witnesses. As always, the divine greeting to them is: Do not be afraid. It is the greeting to Mary on the news of bearing Jesus. It is the angel's greeting to Elizabeth, the mother-to-be of John the Baptist. It is the angel's message to Joseph. It is the angel's greeting to the shepherds. Do not be afraid.

The purpose of crucifixion was to instil fear. Instil fear and scatter the sheep. Instilling fear is the purpose of all those who want to resort to law and order when things are getting frayed around the edges: we need a law to send a message, goes the argument; provide a deterrent; make the potential, targets frightened.

Crucifixion was an instrument of terror; used regularly and in very public ways by the Romans to send a message to gain social control, unleashing fear.

They say that love and fear are opposites. Not love and hate; rather love and fear. So if these two women are present at the crucifixion, at the sealing of the tomb, at the breaking open of the tomb, they are not fearful. At least they are brought there by love. Their love has not been erased by fear. They are able to be present, even in their grief and dismay.

There is something about the love displayed in their faithful presence which enables the two Mary's to witness resurrection. They have not fled but they have remained in the most difficult places: the place of the terrible execution; the moment of terrible wrench when the body of their beloved Jesus is closed in the earth; the moment when they come to attend to the tomb, the resting place of their grief. But being there enables them to witness and to become witnesses to resurrection.

I find there is always something about the movement in the gospels, the patterns in the gospels, which speaks to us still in our own time about the spiritual path, of being able to discover the same things the apostles discovered; to have the same epiphanies in our own lives. For it is true that when we stay in the dark places, the places of abandonment – and sometimes circumstances force us to stay there against our will - when we stay, faithful, watchful devoted, we may see resurrection. We witness resurrection ourselves. And if we undergo this dying and rising ourselves it makes it possible for us to not fear the darkness which others may be caught in, because we have heard the call of the one who summons us through death to light. We become one who is able to say to others: fear not. And having been in these places and passed through

them means that we can accompany others in these same places. And it is when we are able to stay in that place with someone else when they are surrounded by darkness and despair, we can accompany them in being raised up.

In the Apostles Creed we say of Jesus that he was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to the dead.

On the third day he rose again;

Tradition has it that in this descending to the dead Jesus harrowed hell, releasing from captivity those caught there. It's not an idea we might subscribe to with our rational minds, but it does say something of this pattern of the Paschal mystery – of dying and rising. This is the path we affirm in our baptism. And as Jesus took this journey to hell and back, so in following in the way of the cross we may also find ourselves going to hell and back and returning transformed by this path, discovering something of the reach of the love and mercy of God.

In our success oriented world, the ethic is that life should be an upward trajectory of progress and success. At one level we may not subscribe to this but at another level we know our disappointment, our frustration, our deflation when things don't go our way; we may come to realise that at some level we hope that things will go smoothly. When we meet these obstacles, something in us dies. We can emerge from these experiences resentful, bitter, shot through with disappointment. Or we can be faithful, watchful, devoted. Not in a way which denies or glosses over the anguish we may be experiencing but, in this place, trusting God. As Jesus prayed, take this cup, so we will. And then comes resurrection. We emerge from these places wounded, scarred, changed, nevertheless raised up. Glorified. Be not afraid!

The call to take up our cross and follow is not a great marketing ploy; not really an attractive invitation. But life takes us to these places of death when we may undergo transformation and come to comprehend the reality of God's grace in the world. The surprise of resurrection comes not by sheer dint of our own wills but is gift, surprise, unexpected – filling us, like the two Marys, with great joy. And we know that the gift of the life of God is ours.

With joy we celebrate this day of resurrection that God in Christ has come to us, been one of us and has taken the path through death to life, charting a path for us to follow - saints and sinners celebrating, God's triumphant love today.

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He is risen indeed!

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