

An Easter Like No Other

As part of the feedback from 2019's Year of Discipleship, many of you completed feedback forms recording what you'd gained from the year and what you'd like to see happen in 2020 to help you grow further in faith. One person, who has been a Christian for much of their life, commented that what they'd like to see was: *'Something – a sermon or short course maybe – about being a Christian for a long time'*. And, I suspect that what was behind that comment was the acknowledgment that when you've lived through many Christmases and Easters, when you've heard the timeless stories of Christ's birth, his life, his death and resurrection year after year, you wonder what more in the telling there can be to learn, to experience, to get excited by.

There is no doubt that this Easter is an Easter like no other. And our experience of it is one that enables us to reflect more so than any other year on how the disciples might have been feeling in the days following the death of Jesus on the cross. The end of today's gospel reading from John chapter 20 tells us that the disciples were together in a house, and the doors were locked through fear of the Jews. Last year, as part of our Lent film series, some of us watched the film *Risen*. It's the story of the Resurrection as told through the eyes of an unbeliever. Supported by the chief priests, Clavius, a powerful Roman military tribune and his assistant Lucius, are tasked with solving the mystery of what happened to Jesus in the weeks following the crucifixion, in order to disprove the rumours of a risen Messiah. But what really strikes you in the film is the fear amongst those who followed Jesus, as the Roman soldiers go from house to house, arresting people and bringing them before Clavius for interrogation. You see followers hiding in homes with the doors locked, fearful of being discovered, unable to leave their homes and meet with fellow disciples lest they be seen, unable to gather together in any meaningful number to support one another. Maybe only leaving the safety of their homes in ones or twos to fetch food; maybe that had been Thomas' job.

We're told that Jesus had been placed inside the tomb which was then doubly sealed by a huge rock and a Roman seal, made secure we're told in Matthew's gospel at the request of the chief priests and Pharisees, so that his disciples couldn't come and steal the body and then claim that Jesus had risen on the third day as he himself had promised. A burial therefore without the usual anointing. A burial without any mourners allowed to be there. A burial with Jesus totally alone.

This Easter, during a time of lockdown, like the disciples, most of us are in the main confined to our homes, warned against going too far. The fear we share is a fear of contracting Covid-19, and of passing it on to those we love. The police have been given special powers to ensure we follow the instructions we've been given, instructions designed to keep us safe. And even in the places we are allowed to go for short periods of time, we're fearful of the consequences of getting too close to others, fearful that they might have the virus and pass it on. Fearful of shopping, of passing people in the street, of waiting in the queue at the chemist.

We're not able to see family members not living with us, go to work or school, or meet together as church. The usual support mechanisms for dealing with fear and anxiety aren't there anymore, and we can feel alone, particularly if we live on our own. Some of us have experienced the loss of loved ones during this period and haven't been able to say our goodbyes or attend the funeral.

We watch daily briefings on the television, checking in to see how many lives have been lost to Covid in the preceding 24 hours; the number of total deaths overall due to the pandemic; whether anyone notable, someone everyone knew has died. And, as the numbers increase, we may know someone personal, someone known to us, who has died too.

On that first Easter Sunday morning, Mary Magdalene was doing her own checking in. Someone who was both notable *and* personal had died. Almost everyone in the area knew who Jesus was – the itinerant rabbi who did signs and wonders, who some said was the long-awaited Messiah. But Mary knew him personally. The gospel of John doesn't introduce Mary Magdalene until very late in the story – until the moment of crucifixion, when we read that Mary Magdalene was keeping company with Jesus' mother and aunt at the cross. But it is clear that Mary knew Jesus personally. She was up at first light once the Sabbath was over to see the place where they had laid the one she called 'My Lord'.

You know what happens next. It's the story we tell every Easter Sunday. She arrives to see that the stone has been rolled away. She runs quickly to where Simon Peter and the other disciple were staying and they come quickly. They go in and see that the tomb is empty, with the grave clothes neatly folded. And then they quickly return home, maybe afraid of being out in the open for too long.

Mary stays, weeping, and as she herself peers into the tomb, she sees two angels in white seated where Jesus' body had been. '*Why are you crying?*' they ask her. '*They have taken my Lord away and I don't know where they have put him,*' she replies. A man behind her then asks her the same question and, thinking he was the gardener who might have carried him away, she says, '*Tell me where you have put him, and I will get him.*' And Jesus simply speaks Mary's name, and she immediately recognises him.

He surprises her with the work of God, the work of new life and resurrection, a resurrection that is all about love, and relationship, and reconciliation. And Jesus says he must return to the Father. Why? To prepare a place for *us*. So that where he is, we may be also.

She returns to the disciples telling them that she has seen the Lord but, unlike the first time, there doesn't appear to be any attempt to return to the garden to see for themselves what Mary has told them. They retreat back to where they are staying and it's behind these locked doors that, later that day – the evening of the first day of the week, that Jesus suddenly appears. And what Jesus brings into this situation, this place of fear and confusion, is *peace* - a peace that only *he* can bring. In his first words to them, he says '*Peace be with you*'. And to Thomas, a week later, Jesus speaks those same words. To Thomas, who couldn't believe that Jesus was alive until he saw the Lord for himself, Jesus says '*Peace be with you*'.

And it's into *this* Easter, an Easter like no other, that Jesus still brings peace.

If Easter tells us anything, it is that God's love outlasts everything and anything else. It tells us that death does not, and will never, have the last word. Easter breathes God's life over us again and whispers into our waiting hearts – hearts that this year may be filled with uncertainty and fear – that his '*kingdom endures from generation to generation*'. It tells us again that those who trust in the Lord will not be put to shame as he willingly went to the cross for us. It confirms that though, in current times, we live through the Garden of Gethsemane, the cross, and the tomb, God guarantees the resurrection. A resurrection that will be just as the first, centred on love, relationship and reconciliation.

So, may the God of hope fill you with joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit, this Easter and always. Amen.