

## This Joyful Easter Morn!

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Now, it is said that everyone in the Western world above a certain age (I'd suggest 30) can remember where they were when they heard that Princess Diana had died in a car crash in Paris. Many people in other parts of the world will be able to remember where they were and what they were doing at similar moments of great national and international crisis or change. Moments such as the fall of the Twin Towers in New York in 2001, or even the death of HM Queen Elizabeth just last year.

Many of us also remember clearly the precise moment when something startling and very, very good happened to us. I have a vivid memory, 13 years ago now, of the telephone call which told me that I'd been appointed to a job in Cambridge, coming as it did after the trauma of redundancy in Peterborough. And also, of the call to say that I'd been selected to be ordained as a priest in the Church of England and could start my training. In both of these calls I remember being completely lost for words, not something that happens very frequently. I knew, in both instances, from that moment on, my life was going to be different. A whole new world was opening up in front of me. In some respects it was a little frightening; in others, so exciting!

It isn't difficult to understand the mixture of terror and delight that gripped the women who had gone to the tomb that first Easter morning. Each Gospel account of Jesus' resurrection presents the event differently, as though each of the gospel writers is struggling to capture an event so huge that they cannot put their arms around it, so each of them breaks off some part of it to describe. Mark and Luke explain that the women had brought spices, since the burial had taken place in too much of a hurry to wrap the body in the proper way. Matthew simply says that the women had come to look at the tomb. At that point in the story they seem simply to be mourners, just wanting to be there, near Jesus, to pour out their sorrow in as much peace and quiet as possible.

Well, peace and quiet was the last thing they got.

Matthew's graveside scene is easily the most dramatic of the four: an earthquake, an angel, the guards stunned into a swoon, and messages about Jesus going ahead into Galilee. The intervention of the angel makes abundantly clear that the resurrection of Jesus is *God's* action. Just as an angel was sent from God to tell Joseph of God's plan that Mary would bear a son, fulfilling the words of the prophet that he was to be called Emmanuel, '*God with us*'; so too at the end of the story, an angel appears again to accomplish God's purposes.

As God's action, the resurrection cannot be prevented: Pilate and the chief priests make every effort to ensure that Jesus will stay dead, going so far as to seal the stone at the tomb entrance, and placing a guard there. But the angel not only rolls back the stone but sits on it, as if to mock these efforts. Moreover, the sight of the angel makes the guards shake and become as though dead - so much for the efforts of imperial power to get in the way of God's purposes.

The God who remained apparently silent on Good Friday is having the last word. What God is doing is starting something *new*, beginning the new world promised long ago, sending the disciples to Galilee in the first place but then, as we shall see, on to the ends of the earth with the news of what has happened. And he sends them with a promise – that he will be with them always, even to the end of the age.

Though they were thunderstruck with amazement and fear, there is every reason to suppose that the disciples – both the men and the women - remembered for the rest of their lives what had happened that first Easter morning. The accounts of those first few moments go back to genuine personal memory, told again and again to incredulous friends and neighbours, in the tone of voice of someone saying *'I know – I almost couldn't believe it*

*myself! It still seems totally amazing. But this is how it was.'*

We cannot today meet Jesus in the way the women did early that first Easter morning. Of course, it's a vital part of Christian belief and experience that we can and should meet Jesus in spirit, and get to know him as we worship him and learn from him. That personal and intimate relationship with the living Lord is central to what being a Christian means in practice. But we would be seriously misreading Matthew, not to mention the other gospel writers, if we thought his story was just a vivid or coded way of describing that experience. He clearly intended to write something that *actually* happened, something that had not only changed the disciples' hearts but changed the world for ever.

What the resurrection announced was that God's kingdom had come, not as a theory but as a fact, and that the Son of Man had been vindicated after his suffering. But it also announced the start of God's new age, an age that would continue until the end of time.

Take away the resurrection of Jesus, in fact, and you leave Matthew without a gospel. The cross is the climax of his story, but it only makes the sense it does as the cross of someone who was then raised from the dead. The great discourses of the gospel – the Sermon on the Mount, and

all the rest – are Matthew’s way of saying that Jesus is Israel’s Messiah. He is the one giving Israel and the world the new law through which God’s new way of being human has been unveiled before the world. But all this is true only because the one who proclaimed God’s blessing on his followers, the one who announced God’s woes on those who went their own ways, and the one who spoke God’s kingdom-message in parables, is now the risen Lord.

What a roller-coaster of a reading Matthew’s account of the resurrection is. When we hear of the earthquake, we can sense the fear of the women and the guards. When we see the brilliant angel descending from heaven and effortlessly rolling the sealed stone away, we are caught up in wonder at what the hand of God can do. When we hear the announcement of the angel that Jesus has risen, it sparks the hope in us that the inconceivable is somehow possible. Imagining the suddenness of Jesus’ appearance and hearing his words of encouragement inspire the joy that accompanies fulfilled hope.

But, the astounding thing about the Good News of the resurrection is that it’s for everyone. Those first disciples – first the women and then the men – may have been direct witnesses to this amazing event, but God’s message of forgiveness and new life is for all – whoever and

wherever we are. The question is: are we ready, like the women, to rush and share the joyful news? Are we ready, like the men, to receive it? And, are we ready, like the remaining disciples two thousand years ago, to allow this good news to transform our lives forever? I pray that we are. Amen.