

The Hope of Easter

S.M. Lockridge was a prominent African-American pastor, based in San Diego, California from 1953 to 1993, but known for his dynamic, fervent and passionate preaching across the United States and around the world. Arguably, the greatest sermon he ever preached, and well worth watching on You Tube, is one he delivered on a particular Good Friday, called '*It's Friday ... but Sunday's coming!*' It begins:

'It's Friday.

Jesus is praying.

Peter's a sleeping.

Judas is betraying.

But Sunday's coming.'

And he continues with that slogan throughout the sermon, topping and tailing every sentence he writes. It's fiery, powerful preaching with a use of language designed for us to remember, in this case, some decades later.

Over this last year, we've all had to get used to new language – words or phrases that have taken on new meaning in the current pandemic – words such as lockdown, self-isolate, social distancing, reproduction number, key workers, furlough, Rule of 6, elbow bump, Zoom, Zoombombing, variant surge testing, and even the word 'normal'.

And there have been the slogans, embedded in national consciousness. In the early days of the pandemic it was:

'Stay at home. Protect the NHS. Save lives.'

These words were front and centre of the government's messaging when lockdown was introduced in March last year. They reinforced the aim of the national shutdown – to slow the spread of the virus and stop the health service from being overwhelmed. In early May, the government felt sufficiently confident to outline a roadmap out of lockdown and alongside this a new slogan was unveiled:

'Stay alert. Control the virus. Save lives.'

There was much criticism that the phrase '*Stay alert*' wasn't clear, so in July we were given a new slogan that it was hoped *everyone* could understand:

'Hands. Face. Space.'

And last Monday, the slogan changed again:

'Hands. Face. Space. And fresh air,' reminding us all not to sneak indoors as lockdown restrictions ease.

This new language, with its own word – *'corona-speak'* – has emerged to help us make sense of the global crisis that has affected our world for this last year. Words that help articulate our experience in a situation beyond our control and which continues to create much uncertainty. As the country begins to emerge from lockdown a third time, many of us just want things to go back to how they were before.

The story of Jesus' resurrection from John's gospel is one that has been heard in churches such as ours for centuries. When John and the other gospel writers penned their accounts, they were walking out into unmapped territory, away from the safe places of political and religious influence, away from traditional religion, at odds with Roman society and the law. They were putting their lives, and those of the people they loved, in danger, at risk of losing everything, even life itself. These stories, for them, were not made up tales. These stories were a matter of life and death – they took the risk, the risk of being the story-keepers, and we thank them.

But why? Why on earth risk so much for a story? Because the story was the best way they knew of sharing an unfamiliar experience they'd had and were still living through: an experience that if only they could tell us about it, if they could show its shock to them and its effect on them – an infusion of hope in ordinary complex lives – well, it might just help us too. This story is nothing less than a glimpse into a new world which they were discovering. And we get that, for *we too* are experiencing a new world with unfamiliar experiences.

The story from our Bible reading today is telling. There are tears, Mary is crying. And, this year, she could be there for all of us, for there is so much to weep about. Almost 150k deaths of people with Covid-19 recorded on the death certificate; hundreds of thousands of people bereaved; and millions affected in so many other ways. Mary stood weeping. She understands. And tears are a gift from God. Good things often begin when we let ourselves cry. The question that begins the spiritual life is asked by Jesus: *'Tell me, why are you weeping?'*

Upset, Mary seems to want everything as it had been, to take hold of the one she loves, to put everything together as it once was. Again, we understand. *'If only I could be back there, as it used to be, it was all good then'*, Mary must be thinking. That's us too. But Jesus is teaching Mary, and us, the next step in the spiritual adventure of life. He teaches us that too often we would rather keep him here with us where we are, then let him take us where he is going. It is better to let him take hold of us.

As we reflect on familiar phrases over the last year, there's phrases in the resurrection stories which are good to remember, ones like the government warnings that are repeated over and over until they are embedded into our consciousness. Phrases from Jesus such as *'Do not be afraid'*, and *'Peace be with you.'* Words spoken to frightened disciples, locked away through fear of being identified as a follower, of suffering the same fate as Jesus. Words that today, help us to know that Jesus is with us, just as he promised he would be.

So, how do we let Jesus take hold of us, to let him take us where he is going? In his book *'Surprised by Hope'*, Tom Wright laments the fact that after forty days of Lent, pondering what it means, denying ourselves luxuries, being at least a little gloomy, and then bringing it all to a peak with Holy Week, which in turn climaxes in Maundy Thursday and Good Friday ... and then after a rather odd Holy Saturday, we have a *single* day of celebration. Should not Easter, he argues, be an eight-day festival, with champagne served after Morning Prayer or even before, with lots of Alleluias and extra hymns and spectacular anthems? This is our greatest festival after all. Take Christmas away, and in biblical terms you lose two chapters at the front of Matthew and Luke; nothing else. But take Easter away, and you won't have a New Testament; you won't have Christianity; as Paul says, you will still be in your sins. This is our greatest day. Shouldn't we put the flags out!

But he also sets a very important challenge. And a challenge particularly relevant for those easing out of a pandemic, when so much has been lost or put on hold over the last year. He asks this: If Lent is a time to give things up, shouldn't Easter be a time to *take* things up? Christian holiness was never meant to be negative, a bore. Of course you have to weed the garden from time to time; sometimes the ground-ivy may need serious digging before you can get it out. That's Lent for you. But you don't want just to get the garden back to being simply a neat bed of blank earth. Easter is the time to sow new seeds and to plant out a few cuttings. If you are to flourish as a Christian and as

a truly human being, then Easter should mean planting, watering and training up things in your life that ought to be blossoming, filling the garden with colour and perfume, and in due course bearing fruit.

As we emerge out of lockdown over these next few months, we're increasingly realising that everything will *not* be as it once was. We will continue to lament the loss of some things we held dear, but there will be other things we experienced over this last year that we will want to keep hold of – an increased sense of community, a re-balancing of priorities maybe. But where will you let Jesus take you?

As we hear the Easter shout over the next few weeks – a familiar phrase – '*Christ is risen! He is risen indeed. Alleluia!*' - words that are front and centre of the message of the Gospel, of the Good News of Jesus, where will you let the truth they tell take you? To baptism if you've not been baptised? To confirmation? To taking communion if you haven't before? To new patterns of discipleship? Maybe reading your Bible more? Or praying each day? Or thinking where Jesus is calling you to serve? What we know is that, whatever it is, it will be unique to you.

So, something to think about over these next few days and weeks. What will be *your* next step in the spiritual adventure of life? How is Jesus calling your name?

Amen.