

Alleluia! Christ is risen. **He is risen indeed. Alleluia!**

“My Quran was written by God himself and is exactly the same for whoever reads it whereas your bible was written by many different men who cannot even agree on what happened. How can you believe what did or didn’t happen?” That, more or less, was the topic of conversation for the best part of the journey as our taxi driver whisked us to Gatwick the other week. Fortunately, Jane knows me well, so whilst I feigned sleep she answered the many questions asked with confidence, intelligence and grace.

And of all the questions about what did or didn’t happen that our driver might have had in mind, ‘Did Jesus really rise from the dead?’ is surely the most fundamental and important question that can be asked of our Christian faith. It is not just the question at the very heart of our faith, it is the foundational stone on which our faith is built.

For me, just as it was for the early church, it is not the Christmas story which is the beginning point of the gospel proclamation but the Easter story of Christ’s death and resurrection. For evidence, you need look no further than the book of Acts which contain the fledgling sermons of our faith tradition.

How many of those contain reference to Jesus’s teaching – important those his teachings are? Answer – none. Not a single one. Nor does the early life of Jesus receive anything but scant reference. No, the early sermons are about the resurrected Jesus and the promise that those who believe in him, even though they die, will have their own resurrection too.

After the almost slow-motion action of Jesus’s death on the cross, today’s narrative starts at breath neck speed. First, Mary races off to tell the disciples what has happened, and her words act almost as a starting pistol for John and Peter to race to the empty tomb. Remember, a few weeks earlier the same two disciples had been present when Jesus raised his friend Lazarus from death and seen him staggering from his tomb like Boris Karloff in the film Mummy, still wrapped in graveclothes and needing others to unbind him. Yet, on their arrival the burial strips are laid out neatly. And it is at that moment the disciple whom Jesus loved, saw, and believed. Although our text does not say what he believed, surely it must be that Jesus truly, was resurrected.

Integral to the story that Peter and John are, they are in effect the support cast to Mary Magdalen.

After all, it is she who first discovers the empty tomb and then, as we heard, is left there on her own as the two disciples return to their homes.

I think this is a critical indication of the story’s truth given the patriarchal nature of 1<sup>st</sup> century Israel. While it is true that, under very limited circumstances, women were allowed to testify in a court of law, it is also the case that, in first-century Jewish society, a woman’s testimony was worth far less than that of a man.

If you were making up a story in an attempt to persuade others that Jesus had been resurrected, you would never have used women as your primary witnesses. Any made-up story would have featured male disciples like Peter, John, or Andrew as the discoverers of the empty tomb, because the testimony of men would have provided much-needed credibility to the story.

And as our taxi driver was quick to point out – the gospels differ in recording who first sees the empty tomb. Luke simply tells us they are women but does not name them. John is more specific and names Mary Magdalene as the one person there. In Matthew she is accompanied by two other women called Mary. In Mark’s account two Marys are joined by Salome.

But to me the variation isn't the important thing; it's the fact that while Jesus' male disciples were cowering in fear, hiding from the authorities, it was women who were the earliest witnesses of the empty tomb.

There would simply be no reason for the early church to concoct such a scenario unless it was true. Why would the early Christians portray their male leadership as cowards and place females in the role of primary witnesses? And yet, despite these evidential handicaps, the earliest Christians insisted that the first witnesses to the empty tomb were, in fact, women. The conclusion I have come to is that these women were indeed the initial witnesses of the empty tomb and that the earliest Christians were unwilling to lie about it despite its potentially embarrassing nature. Or as Sherlock Homes was apt to say, when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.

As we heard in today's text from John, Mary Magdalene is not only the first person to discover the tomb is empty but also the first witness to the resurrected Christ. For many years, Mary Magdalene has slipped under my radar. Yes, I knew her as a cast member of the Easter story, but certainly not as the revered Saint in the Catholic tradition and yet today, I've come to see her differently.

I do so for two reasons. Firstly, archaeologists have extensively uncovered the remains of the original town of Magdala, and it now sits adjacent to a newly built Christian retreat centre and chapel complex dedicated to biblical transforming encounters with Jesus, particularly those with women. The buildings and grounds contain some of the most striking and memorable modern Christian frescos, paintings and statues that I have seen first-hand. There is also the most exciting and inspiring altar table in the shape of a 1<sup>st</sup> century boat.

Secondly, along with many others I have been entranced by watching the transformation of Mary Magdalen as portrayed in the film series *The Chosen* from a desperate demon driven woman to a loving, caring follower of Jesus and I'm excited about the prospect of seeing how she comes to earn the oft used sobriquet of 'the apostle to the apostles'.

The empty tomb demonstrates that death is not the end of the journey. It is the reverse; that Jesus's resurrection is in fact the start of a whole new adventure for us. An adventure of further understanding; of maturing faith and in this case particular case of discovering through the relationship between Mary Magdalen and Jesus, how our own relationship with Jesus can be made closer and more loving.

In Mary I see a journey from the darkness of unfaith to partial faith and finally to fulfilled faith. Even then, Mary's understanding is clouded by disappointment, grief, and unspeakable loss. And echoing what Michael said last week, I am reminded that I need to learn from those times when, like Mary, I fail to recognise Jesus because I'm too caught up in my own emotions. And as a result be filled with hope and joy when I finally do recognise his love for me.

Alleluia! Christ is risen. **He is risen indeed. Alleluia!**

**Rev. Terry Ward-Hall, 9 April 2023**