

EASTER DAY 2020 (Year A)

I have taken the rather easy route out in terms of our Gospel reading this morning. Although we are in the year of Matthew for most of our Sunday Gospel readings this year, I played safe with the beautiful account of the Resurrection in John – the encounter between the Risen Lord and Mary Magdalene. I never fail to be moved at this interaction of love, written by John in a way which enables us to put ourselves in the place of Mary. It is OUR name he calls, and our own recognition of the Risen Lord within our lives causes us to cry, ‘Rabbouni, Master.’ And this leads to.....to what? *‘Do not hold on to me, do not cling to me.’*

Imagine Mary Magdalene’s being told that she was not to hold on to the physical presence of Jesus – in the Latin of St Jerome, *‘Noli me tangere.’* I am very fond of the beautiful painting of the same name by Graham Sutherland in Chichester Cathedral. In it, the Lord and Mary both appear in South American guise. Mary, in a vivid green dress is kneeling, holding a hand up towards Jesus. He, with a lovely straw hat on, such as a gardener might wear, is ascending an outside staircase of the building which forms the backdrop. The vivid orange and turquoise of the scene makes what is quite a small painting visible the whole length of the cathedral. There is a tiny detail which enables us to understand this moment in the Resurrection story. Set in the wall in a niche near the bottom of the steps hangs a key – and that is because this is a key moment in our faith journey as it was for the Magdalene. The resurrection marks a shift in the understanding of our relationship with God, whose love fills creation and beyond. Within our humanity - in the face of Jesus Christ - God’s abiding love is made know to us in selfless love, revealed through death and resurrection.

I said that I avoided Matthew’s account but let me qualify that. Matthew displays this fundamental moment of relational shift in a very Matthean way when he reaches this point in his Gospel. There are two earthquakes; one at the moment the Lord dies on the cross, and the other at the Resurrection, when (and again very typical of Matthew when he deals this this unknowable event) he writes of an angel rolling away the gravestone of the Lord’s tomb: *‘He rolled back the stone and sat upon it. His appearance was like lightning and his clothing white as snow.’* Matthew wants us to understand the death and resurrection of the Lord as something which shakes the foundation of all that we know. Ultimately this, too, is John’s purpose in *his* account although more gently put. For both Gospel writers, this understanding is not one foisted by God on to humanity. It is relational to each of us– our response to the Lord’s death and resurrection allows us to journey towards understanding the depth of Love open to us, our response, and the way this flows through our lives.

Peter and the beloved disciple run to the tomb when Mary tells them she has found it empty, but even then, and perhaps understandably, still have no full understanding of what has taken place. The beloved disciple, seeing the linen wrappings and the head cloth rolled up and set apart, has some inkling, in that *‘He saw and believed.’* Yet both he and Peter have more journeying in order to grasp the reality of the new life of Faith which has dawned, and so for both, *‘as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise form the dead.’*

The detail of this moment takes us back to the Raising of Lazarus, the Gospel reading we heard on Passion Sunday. If you remember, Jesus told others to remove the linen wrappings from Lazarus – he was bound in death, and even in new life could not unbind himself. Yet

here in the resurrection account the placement of both the strips of linen and the head cloth (the *soudarion*) point to something different. John wants us to know that this moment of shift for humanity's understanding of God's love is a moment in time and space in which we are invited to experience the fulness of life through the Risen Lord.

Remember, again, that in that radiant moment when Mary Magdalene recognises the voice of Jesus, she is told not to hold on to him – here is a new and abiding way in which we are to experience his love. Mary does just that; she lets go and becomes the Apostle to the Apostles, bringing them the news of the Lord's Resurrection. Ultimately, on the Day of Pentecost, the power of the Holy Spirit floods the disciples' lives with the ability to share the Good News of Jesus Christ, and Peter is speaking *in the Spirit* in today's reading from Acts, revealing that this wonderful gift of the fulness of life is open to all people. It doesn't matter who you are, what flaws you might have. All that is required is a desire to be led on a journey of exploring the fulness of life in Jesus Christ and allowing every aspect of who you are to be flooded with the grace of God made known through the Lord.

In this time of pandemic, we find ourselves challenged on many fronts. All of us will have experienced moments of loss on all sorts of fronts. Yet I hope too that we will have experienced connection to each other in different ways. When we see the signs of selfless love displayed in hospitals, care homes and schools (including our own) throughout our nation - of people seeking to help others in many situations even at cost to their own wellbeing - we see the power of God's love at work even in people who might profess to have no orthodox faith or faith at all. This is Resurrection Life at work and is humbling.

Two things struck me during our Good Friday worship. The first an image during one of the worship songs used during the Family Service of the imprint of a pair of trainer soles on a beach which left the words, *'Follow Jesus,'* in the sand. Then Nicholas Fraying, the Dean Emeritus of Chichester Cathedral, quoted in the Devotion, the Indian poet, musician and artist Rabindranath Tagore who said: *'Faith is the bird that feels the light and sings when the dawn is still dark.'*

Above all, our Faith is one of hope before the dawn- even in the darkest of circumstances - because we know that Jesus has walked through every stage of life and death in order to lead us to New Life – Resurrection Life. As I often say, this life begins here and now, and leads us ever closer to our *ultimate* resting place in the heart of God's Love. In displaying God's love in the way we live our lives; we too feel the light and sing when the dawn is still dark.

Today of all days, let us acknowledge the presence of Jesus Christ within our lives as we seek to follow him. There is a Salvationist hymn I particularly love called, 'I serve a risen Saviour.' The chorus reminds us of this abiding presence:

He lives, He lives, Christ Jesus lives today!
He walks with me and talks with me along life's narrow way.
He lives, He lives, salvation to impart!
You ask me how I know He lives?
He lives within my heart.

Alleluia! The Lord is Risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!



Acts 10: 34-43

³⁴ Then Peter began to speak to them: 'I truly understand that God shows no partiality, ³⁵ but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. ³⁶ You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. ³⁷ That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: ³⁸ how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. ³⁹ We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; ⁴⁰ but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, ⁴¹ not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. ⁴² He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. ⁴³ All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.'

Colossians 3: 1-4

So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, ³ for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴ When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.

John 20: 1-18

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. ² So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.' ³ Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went towards the tomb. ⁴ The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵ He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶ Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷ and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. ⁸ Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; ⁹ for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ¹⁰ Then the disciples returned to their homes.

¹¹ But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look^[a] into the tomb; ¹² and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. ¹³ They said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' She said to them, 'They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.' ¹⁴ When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵ Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?' Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.' ¹⁶ Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabbouni!' (which means Teacher). ¹⁷ Jesus said to her, 'Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."' ¹⁸ Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her.