

Easter Day 2021 – 4th April. St Mary's Cathedral, Edinburgh

John 20.1-18

Easter is strange, let's face it. Good Friday, the death of a man, that chimes perfectly with the world as we know it. It's easy for us, especially this year, to identify with human suffering and frailty, to see ourselves in this innocent victim. For, after all, everyone born sooner or later dies. How could it not also be true for the Christmas child, if the incarnation, God as flesh, is to mean anything?

Yes, easy enough for us to see ourselves as victim, innocent, perhaps not so easy for us to admit that we make victims of others. The challenge of the cross is that it speaks not just of the pain we endure but of the pain we inflict, the injustices we collude with or prefer to ignore.

Nevertheless, Good Friday plumbs the depths and explores the darkness of human experience. Whereas Easter Day, on the other hand, what's that all about? It would be strange enough if it was simply about the revival of a corpse, but the stories of resurrection make it stranger still.

When the women get to the tomb it's empty, no one there. In our story, at Mary's urging, Peter and John arrive, breathless. They go in and there are the grave clothes but no Jesus. In other versions of the story, the two angels make it very explicit: 'He's not here, he's gone ahead of you...'. And, in a sense, we've been trying to catch him up ever since.

Again, in the story we've just heard, Mary returns to the tomb, looking for what she's lost and doesn't find him. Turning around, turning away from the tomb, she does find something, someone, yet she doesn't recognize what she's found because he's a stranger. It's only when he speaks her name, and she knows she's recognized that she's able to recognize in return.

So it is for most of us, most of the time; the Christ we meet is strange, a stranger to us. Like Mary we may not hold on to him, for he's always more than we thought, he's always going ahead of us. In some perverse way it would be easier if he remained dead, confined by the walls of the tomb, for then he could be the eternal victim – and that would be the story we could tell.

Yet Easter forbids us to tell that story – he's no longer the man done to death by human depravity for he is no longer dead. God chooses not to be the victim and offers us the same choice. God chooses not to retaliate, to victimize in return, and offers us the same choice. This, this is the fruit of the Incarnation, that God gives us back our humanity, not defined by death, but enlarged, opened, the stone rolled away.

Is this what it means to be creatures made in the image of God? In a year when we've learned, through self-denial, so much of what we value about our humanity, Easter teaches us that all that, our neediness and our nobility, our poverty and our glory are all somehow invited into God's purposes and given meaning.

The prophet, Jeremiah, speaks of a tree planted by the riverside, set firmly on the land yet with roots reaching deep into the stream. Such a tree has no need to fear drought, no need to compete or suck the life from other trees, for it's always fed by abundant water. So too, he says, for those who trust in God. There is abundance, plenty to go round, no need to put others down, resent other's success, or to fear we must compete for God's love, because there's always more than we could possibly need. Whereas, mostly, our instincts are shaped not by such abundance but by fear of scarcity – that love, hope, forgiveness will be withheld.

This is why Easter is strange, Jesus is strange. Often unrecognized by his disciples, passing through closed doors and protective walls. It's why even now when we meet God we go away from the encounter changed, challenged, even bruised, for the truth of God disorients us, leaving us dissatisfied with the old and uncomfortable with the new.

How can it be that tiny fragments of this material world, bread and wine, may be charged with the life of God? Yet generations of disciples have found that it is so. A meal first offered on the night that he was betrayed, but given in the promise that after all that, the running away, the denials, the failures, they would meet again to receive the generosity of Jesus' self-giving, in which death is overwhelmed by life. The Eucharist, for so long denied us during this pandemic, promises that the whole of creation may be charged with the glory of God.

The tomb is empty, not because he's gone from us but because he isn't to be found in a place of death. For as, like Mary, we turn towards life and light there God is found again. He breaks through the walls we build in fear or shame, and when he comes he is always a stranger – for if we had our way we would construct a different Christ, a lesser Christ, a familiar, a domesticated Christ. Yet, as Mary discovered, there is always a sense that the gardener we meet really has taken away our Lord – taken away the one we can possess and replaced him with the One who possesses us.

The resurrection life is to be found whenever people who are written off, discarded, degraded become focal points of hope, change, possibility, whether because of their actions, like Captain Tom Moore, or because of what they've suffered, like George Floyd or Sarah Everard. It's to be found when people choose to act differently. When they choose not revenge, not to perpetuate violence, anger, abuse, but choose instead the way of non-violence, refusing to scapegoat or demonise and to carry the cost, sometimes the immense cost of all that, for themselves. We can all think of examples of this.

Easter is when God shows us that this is the way to fullness of life. That forgiveness, acceptance, even in face of huge cruelty and utter rejection, is the way God chooses. Easter invites us to make such choices for ourselves. Not to be passive in the face of suffering or evil but active in passing on the forgiveness we've received to others – for God, who is our God is their God too.

This is what transforms the world, and it's the reason today we sing 'Alleluia!' This day of resurrection isn't just a celebration of one man who was dead and is alive, nor is it merely the anticipation of a life that is to come, first and foremost it's an invitation for us to

discover how the aliveness of Christ may transform the way we live, and enable others to live, the life God has given us.

Amen.