

## **SERMON SUNDAY 4 APRIL 2021**

### **Mark 16.1-8; Acts 10.34-43**

I don't know about you, but I can't always predict how people are going to react in any given situation. Some ordinary people, who don't normally stand out in the crowd, often turn out to be absolute stars in a crisis, whilst the ones we may have thought would be brave, can go to pieces.

Take the disciples of Jesus, as an example. We would have expected them to remain faithful and firmly behind their leader all the way, yet when Jesus was arrested in the garden of Gethsemane, on the evening before his crucifixion, his disciples deserted him and fled. And when Jesus was then taken before the High Priest in Jerusalem, even Peter denied having had any association with Jesus, when he was challenged.

We are all different, capable of responding and reacting in different ways in differing situations.

Compare their behaviour to that of three ordinary women, who also followed Jesus. After his crucifixion, it was these three women, who appeared to be nothing special on the surface, but who turned out to be extraordinarily brave.

I thank God that Jesus never discourages women from being in his presence, women like Mary and her sister Martha, the woman with the issue of blood or the Syrophenician woman. He is always inclusive in his attitude towards them.

The first of these three women was Mary Magdalene. She was from Magdala by the shore of the Sea of Galilee, about 23 miles from the Nazareth, the home town of Jesus.

The second was Mary the mother of James and the third was Salome, the mother of two disciples James and John.

The three would have known one another quite well. Whenever Jesus was in Galilee, they'd followed him and provided for him. They probably did ordinary, everyday chores, such as preparing food and cooking meals. They would certainly have heard conversations between Jesus and his disciples as they served them all. They may have been present at the Sermon on the Mount or when Jesus fed the 5,000.

And these three ordinary women were faithful, in not only providing for Jesus during his life here on earth, but they also sought to provide for him in his death.

The three had come south to Jerusalem from Galilee, to be with Jesus. They had witnessed his crucifixion on that day we call Good Friday.

Why 'Good'? Because that was the day our sins were paid for by Jesus. He was the ransom in the place of all human kind and so we can now be forgiven our sins, forgiven our trespasses.

And even though this crucifixion had turned their world upside down, the three were exceptional, in that they had never deserted Jesus nor denied him.

These three were organised. They'd bought anointing oil, in preparation for anointing the dead body of Jesus. That anointing could only take place after the second day of his death, because that second day was a sabbath day and so no work could be done on that day.

We have no idea of whether or not those women could easily afford to buy the oil. It may have been a struggle for them 'to make ends meet' for its purchase. So much we can take for granted and be unaware of.

They were also organised in that they'd met up together on the third day, very early in the morning. The three headed away from the safety of their own homes to walk to the tomb, to where Jesus had been laid, to anoint his body.

But before they could anoint Jesus, they knew that they had to gain access to the tomb and in front of the tomb was a huge stone that would need to be rolled away. Between the three of them, they simply wouldn't have had the physical strength to move it.

Yet it didn't stop them from setting off on their journey to the tomb. We don't hear of them saying 'It's no good. It won't work. We're beaten from the start. What's the point?'

They had FAITH. They knew about Jesus changing water into wine at the wedding feast. They may have met some of the lepers who were healed by Jesus, or some of the blind men who could now see. They may even have heard Peter tell the tale of how his own doubt, and the fear of walking on water on the Sea of Galilee, had turned into faith and joy when Jesus reached out his hand towards him.

And yet, although these three women knew Jesus had said, 'Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up', they may not have realised that he was referring to his own body. So their faith didn't extend to an expectation of seeing their risen Lord. Their expectation was of anointing his dead body.

Little did they know what was in store for them. When they arrived at the tomb and looked up, they saw that the very large stone had already been rolled back!

Imagine the scene. As they stand there, ready with the bottles of anointing oil in their hands, they see that the tomb is empty. Not only is their Lord Jesus not there, but a young man is there, who we believe to be an angel. He speaks to them.

‘Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.’

This message should have reassured the three. The angel knows who they are and why they have come. He even gives them instructions on what to do next. But at this point their faith momentarily leaves them. Their combined reaction to these words is one of terror and amazement. They fled from the tomb. They are so very afraid that they initially say nothing at all.

As for the disciples of Jesus. We know from John’s Gospel that on the evening of the first day of the week, the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews.

But when is an ending not the end? When the story goes on to new beginnings.

We have to look beyond Mark’s Gospel to discover that this event was a complete life changer, not only for those three women, but also for the disciples of Jesus, for those who were not Jews and for those of us here today.

Take Peter for example. He was fully restored back from his place of having denied Jesus. And it was this restored Peter who God went on to use, having first revealed to him that there was no difference between Jews and Gentiles. Peter was now able to respond to the Holy Spirit when men arrived to see him at Joppa on the coast, asking him to come to the home of an Italian soldier called Cornelius, who was serving abroad in the army.

The life changing event didn’t end with Cornelius. It passed on down the line. Centuries later, saints such as Aidan and Cuthbert brought the Good News of Jesus Christ to us in the north east of England, gentiles living about 2,400 miles from where the action took place that first Easter morning.

Jesus Christ is alive, he is risen from the dead. Hallelujah!

And so Easter Day is the most special day of the year in the Christian calendar.

Easter Day is also a very special day for me, because it was 31 years ago, on Easter day, when I first came to the Church of the Holy Spirit. I sat down in this church and suddenly thought that I'd finally come home. I can still remember Revd Stoker Wilson preaching on the truth that we don't need to stay inside the dark empty tomb, because Jesus is not there. He's alive. He's outside the tomb.

Where are you today? If you are inside the tomb, I invite you to step outside.

Will you let your story become part of Christ's story? Have you heard him calling you by name? Will you let Christ love you, restore you, lead you to God the Father and God the Holy Spirit?

Will you join with others in being a true ambassador for Christ?

God had much to heal and restore in my own life and he has done it. We can all experience hope, friendship and the absolute joy of knowing the love of God and belonging in his family.

When is an ending not the end?

Endings are not the end because they open doors to new beginnings.

Jesus said, 'Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.' Jesus is like that single grain. Though he died, he lives and still bears much fruit today, through all who love and obey him.

So today, in our Eucharistic prayer, let's listen carefully to Revd Tom as he says, 'And so, Father, calling to mind his death on the cross, his perfect sacrifice made once for the sins of the whole world; rejoicing in his mighty resurrection and glorious ascension and looking for his coming in glory, we celebrate this memorial of our redemption.'

Let's party!

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