

All Saints Odell Easter Day, 12th April, 11am**Acts 10:34-43****John 20:1-18****Introduction:**

The resurrection of Christ at Easter is central to the Christian faith, but much more this, it is an event that has relevance for every person. It addresses one of our primary concerns, namely our mortality and what happens to us at death. It has opened up the possibility of what may happen after death, of life after death. This is particularly relevant as we live in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the previous verses in Chapter 19 we see that Jesus is really dead and buried: Joseph knew that Jesus was dead and so he requested the body; the centurion knew that Jesus was dead and testified to Pilate; Pilate was assured that Jesus was dead and released the body; Joseph and Nicodemus prepared the body of Jesus for burial; and Jesus was placed in a tomb, which was sealed.

Luke tells us that the women saw the burial. And it is the women who go to the tomb on Easter morning as we have read.

The tomb is really empty: Mary finds the tomb open and empty and runs to tell Peter and John; they recognise the truth that the tomb is empty, but do not understand; Mary returns to the tomb and an angel asks her why she is crying.

It is then she encounters Jesus.

Jesus says three things: first he asks Mary why she is crying and who she is looking for; secondly he tells her not to hang

onto him for he has yet to ascend to the Father; and thirdly he sends her to give the news of his resurrection to the disciples. Mary does as she is bid and is the first to tell the Good News of the resurrection.

He has risen:

Joseph boldly asks for the body of Jesus. A disciple in secret, now he with Nicodemus pin theirs colours to the mast. This is a risky thing to do. Pilate needs to confirm that Jesus has actually died. He sends a centurion to check. There is no mistake; Jesus is dead. Pilate, clearly had his doubts about the accusations brought against Jesus, for unlike most crucified criminals he is given over to Joseph for burial in a tomb, rather than burial in an unmarked common plot. The request from a member of the Jewish leadership may have confirmed his suspicions. Following normal customs, the body is wrapped in a shroud and a stone rolled across the entrance to the tomb. The women note where the grave is.

The day after the Sabbath the women who had observed the burial come to visit the tomb. The Gospel writers never sought to cover up the disciples' failings and this part of the account is no different – it is the women, and not the men, who walk to the tomb and it is Mary Magdalene who meets the resurrected Jesus. If nothing else, this fact certainly lends authenticity to the account. The Early Church would certainly not have made up a report, in which women were the key witnesses. We understand the significance when we hear the rabbinical statement: “Sooner let the words of the Law be burnt than delivered to a woman.” Yet, it is the women who go to the tomb, and it is a woman who is the first witness of the resurrection of Jesus.

He is not here:

‘Who are you are looking for?’

Who has taken the body and where have they put it?

‘Mary’, says Jesus; ‘Rabboni’ she cries out in joy.

God intervenes in history when, from the human point of view, everything is lost. The significance of what has happened will not be understood until Jesus encounters them and sends the disciples out as witnesses in the power of the Spirit.

One reason for disbelief is that people are looking for the wrong evidence. Throughout his ministry Jesus refused to give cosmic displays of power. We have to look through the surface facts and perceive the hidden realities. Faith listens to the witness of the women and believes.

Some years ago in the weeks leading up to Easter the BBC showed an investigation into the life of Jesus – “*Son of God*” presented by former Jerusalem correspondent, now Middle East Editor, Jeremy Bowen. Jeremy, who professes no belief (although I know that he is a lapsed Catholic, I was his babysitter for the first five years of his life) studiously led the audience through the facts. After episodes dealing with the birth and ministry of Jesus, the third episode dealt with Jesus’ death and resurrection. Facts are established, but these must be followed by a step of faith, for it is only through our step of faith that we find proof – our encounter with Jesus.

At first the evidence for Mary is clear and alarming (1-2). Peter and John run to verify Mary’s fearful cry: ‘They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put him!’

Peter and John believe Mary, but don't understand that Jesus had to rise from the dead.

Mary returns to the tomb and sees the angels who ask her why she is crying - *they* know that Jesus is alive. Human eyes do not witness the resurrection, but the angels are witnesses to what has happened.

It is at this point that the risen Jesus in love and compassion for Mary, reveals himself alive.

For John, and for the Early Church, the empty tomb is one fact, which Peter and John can confirm, but the key evidence for the resurrection is the testimony of Mary Magdalene.

Go to my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'

'I have seen the Lord!' is the Gospel according to Mary. Mary has been encountered by Jesus, has spoken to him, and worshipped him.

Here is John's understanding of discipleship - Mary is sent by Jesus, the very first apostle, as a witness of the resurrection. In the next few verses we find Jesus appearing to the disciples behind locked doors, in their fear of the Jewish leaders.

Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit into them and sends them out with the message of forgiveness and new life.

Jesus had prayed for his disciples, and those to whom he would send them, on the night before his crucifixion.

²⁰“My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, ²¹that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²²I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are

one— ²³I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. (John 17:20-23)

Here we find the principle upon which discipleship is based: deny self (no longer self-centred but Christ centred lives); take up your cross (take on the Christ-like life of self-denying sacrificial love); and follow me (come join Christ in his mission of love and life for the world).

Here at the empty tomb was the evidence that would be the basis of their faith; the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. But beyond this there needs to be an act of faith. They are called to be witnesses of what they have seen and heard. Faith is: believing, following, and telling others.

This is the risky journey of faith that we are called to undertake, but with the assurance that Jesus has gone ahead. It is in encountering the risen Jesus, and not in the empty tomb, that faith is confirmed. For those whom the living Jesus has encountered, the fact of the empty tomb is a sign that points to a unique act, an act of God, which brings life out of death. The journey of faith for the first Christians was no easier, yet their testimony, like many who have travelled this road since, has been of Jesus being with us and ahead of us on our journey of faith.

Conclusion:

Easter brings many questions, as the Christian Church celebrates a mind-blowing claim, that Jesus, the carpenter's son, is no less than the Son of God, and that the proof of this claim is demonstrated in his being raised from death, by God.

It is therefore not surprising that there is the usual crop of TV programmes to investigate the claims that Christians make. While nothing concrete is proved, there are good grounds for the reasonability of the believing in Jesus, but proof, if we want it, is only to be found in meeting the risen Christ, and inviting him into our lives.

And in the current circumstances in the midst of fear, anxiety, and bereavement brought about by the Corona virus, the presence of the Risen Christ with us and holding onto us is more vital than ever.

This is the Gospel we profess, and which we are called to share.

The proof is ultimately seen in the post-Easter changed lives of the disciples of Jesus, and continues to be seen in transformed lives of those who trust Jesus with their lives. Like the couple that I spoke with in Rushden some years ago. I went around to see them because I needed a map to attend a meeting in London. They worked there. But having left our house for a ten minute meeting I arrived home some three hours later. I wanted to get to an address in London, they wanted to find a map of how to get to heaven – well, eternal life. At the end of those three hours of chat, they both invited Jesus into their lives.

The whole church could see the transformation (glowing with joy) the following Sunday, and still witnessing today.

Easter Gospel; ‘I am the resurrection and the life’, ‘Life in all its fullness’; ‘Go and tell the Good News.’

I found my way to my meeting and they found God.