

the empty tomb

a sermon preached on

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st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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the lections: Acts 10: 34-43; Psalm 118; 1 Corinthians 15: 1-11; 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... Jn. 20.1

The first day of the new week of God's creation. But it is still dark. Faith has to pass through its long day and dark night. Mary Magdalene has come to the tomb. She finds to her horror and confusion that the stone has been taken away. She runs immediately to Peter and the beloved disciple.

The meeting of these three is a precious moment in the Church's journey to full-bodied faith. Mary Magdalene reports that 'they'—all the violent forces that had condemned and crucified her master—have now succeeded in even taking away his body. She speaks for all the disciples, who were left at a loss in the events at that time: 'We do not know where they have laid him'. The grieving disciples have now lost all contact with Jesus who had been so horribly separated from them. The reported emptiness of his tomb serves only to increase their own sense of emptiness. Their last hold on the former reality has been broken.

While Peter and the Beloved Disciple set out immediately for the tomb as if to verify their loss, we, at this later stage of the church, can accompany them on what will be a path of faith. They both run, the beloved disciple arrives at the burial site first. Through the ages Christian contemplation has found in his speed the vigour that came from his special intimacy with Christ. The disciple bends down and looks in. He sees only the linen burial cloths, and waits for Peter to arrive. The way of faith is the way of the whole church, even if it moves slowly and requires patience on the part of all. Still, it leads to a clearer vision of what there is to be believed. The disciple then enters after Peter, and notes not only the linen wrappings, but also the head cloth, another part of the material that had shrouded the mortal remains of Jesus, rolled up in a separate place. In that empty darkness, the light of faith begins to shine: 'He saw and he believed'. Not only has the stone been taken away, but also the wrappings of death are also unravelled. Such was not so in the case of Lazarus when Jesus called him forth from the tomb. Lazarus was restored to this life, after which he would finally die, still bound by the power of death. But Jesus is not bound; he is risen, to be the source of deathless life—though the full story of God's love, giving life in such a death, had yet to be fully understood in the light of the scriptures and the Spirit's witness.

After Peter and the other disciple have 'returned to their homes', Mary Magdalene is left alone in her desolation. Darkness and emptiness are still all that is obvious to her. Though in tears, she too looks in. But this time she sees not merely grave-clothes in the darkness of the tomb. There is radiance there—two messengers from God, 'angles in white', the awesome fringe of a glory that is to be revealed. She is asked, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' She is not to know how later generations will recall the promise made by him whose mortal remains she is seeking, about how heaven would be made open and the believer would see 'the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man'. She is not yet at that moment of vision. The stone still lies heavy on her heart, enclosing her in sadness.

The loving irony of the evangelist invites us now to note a further step in Mary Magdalene's journey of faith. She must be a witness for all who will come to believe. She turns around, looking away from the tomb, and sees Jesus standing there. She does not recognise him; her eyes are still not focussed in the new light that has begun to shine. She is faced with another question, this time from him: 'Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?'

God is present in our lives at the edge of our real questions. Jesus is always a question for us. At the beginning of John's Gospel the first words spoke by Jesus are: 'What are you looking for?' What is Mary Magdalene really looking for now?

The irony deepens. For Mary now supposes Jesus to be the gardener, a party to the violent forces that had removed him from her. She pleads with the still unrecognised Jesus to her, where the body has been concealed so that she can take him away and give him a decent burial. But the Good Shepherd, who knows his sheep by name, now addresses her by name: 'Miriam!' and all the intimacy of former times breaks out in her answer: 'Rabbouni! Which means Teacher'. She tries to embrace him, to hold on to the way things were. But now the freedom of faith demands more. She must not cling to the Jesus she had known, no matter how tender her previous attachment had been: 'Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father'. The climactic hour of Jesus' glorification is still in progress in which he will be revealed as the light of the world. In this hour, Mary Magdalene is not to cling to the past, but is called to become a marker of the future—'Go to my brothers'—with the message from Jesus, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God'. The disciples are now no longer servants but friends, no longer even disciples, but brothers and sisters of Jesus in the one communion of new life. Life now moves, in a heaven opened to all who will believe and enter it.

In the darkness and emptiness of the tomb, Mary has been changed. She is no longer a casualty in a terrible defeat but a witness to true life. Once reproached by the radiant angels in the tomb for her blind grief, she becomes herself a heaven sent messenger of joy: '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'.

It never was, nor could it ever be, that Christian faith could find its energy in the mere fact of an empty tomb. There was no point in seeking the living among the dead. The joy of the disciples arose from their encounter with the crucified Lord, now living and life-giving. Once they have believed, they show no inclination to haunt a gravesite. Faith now consists in a full-bodied connection with the risen Jesus who had been buried as a crucified criminal.

The accounts of the empty tomb in the gospel prevent our faith from being a nice construction placed on a terrible reality. But the empty tomb does stand as a kind of historical marker for the reality of the 'new life' now revealed and offered to all. It expresses a demand—set right there in the history of human defeat and failure—for faith to wake to its full potential. The empty tomb points away from itself. The absence of the body of Jesus promises a new presence; the emptiness of his tomb witnesses to a new fullness of contact; a gravesite opens beyond itself to a whole universe transformed.

Faith comes to the tomb, not to stay there, but to break forth in a new sense of wonder. Because he is risen, everything is changed: the universe is now different. To enter into this empty tomb is to be challenged to stake all on the real victory of God's self-giving love. In the light of that truth, the sting of death has been drawn.

The empty tomb plants the seeds of questioning in the solid ground of history. It is profoundly disturbing for any version of a world hermetically sealed against the extravagances of love.

The emptiness of the tomb underscores, the advantage of Jesus going away. Not defeated by death, no longer buried behind a great stone, no longer bound by the shrouds of death, no longer restricted to the expectations or fears or grief of disciples, Jesus lives, a source of life for all. The grain of wheat, falling into the ground and dying, has not remained alone.