

**Easter Day**  
**27/03/05**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Acts 10:34-43**  
**Psalm 118**  
**Colossians 3:1-4**  
**John 20:1-18**

**Christ is risen: Cherubim epistemology**

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Your holy hearsay  
is not evidence,  
give me the good news  
in the present tense.

What happened  
nineteen hundred years ago,  
may not have happened,  
how am I to know.

The living truth  
is what I long to see:  
I cannot lean upon  
what used to be.

So shut your Bible up  
and show me how  
the Christ you talk about  
is living now.

Sydney Carter's provocative poem reflects the question many have today, and challenges us to consider how to speak about what we celebrate here. The Resurrection narratives do little to satisfy modern questions about what happened and how. There were no eyewitnesses to the actual event and, although certain elements are consistent, the gospels vary in their telling of the story. The gospels are not historical, scientific or medical accounts of Easter Day. They are based on the disciples' witness to being encountered by Jesus and restored to faith when no hope of faith or life seemed possible. They were reunited in community and sent out to tell the news that life is available in Jesus' name. The empty tomb is a sign of what all this means, but it proves nothing. And no amount of apparitions would make any difference to the church's credibility in the world, apart from the testimony of forgiven lives communicating forgiveness; of acceptance being shown by those who find themselves accepted, and of those who were lost witnessing to their being found. Jesus himself is the explanation for the faith that came to birth at Easter. He himself is love to the loveless shown, that they might lovely be. And the primary evidence for resurrection, even today, is the continuing presence of a fellowship which seeks to live according to the restoring grace revealed in him who died.

Rowan Williams has drawn attention to the way John's Gospel makes an distinctive contribution to the resurrection narratives when it says Mary saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and one at the feet. This image recalls the Ark of the Covenant, the portable throne on which the Lord God was

invisibly enthroned between two cherubim. Hebrew religion did not allow the worship of God in visible form, and the name of God could not be uttered. This means God is not tangible and accessible. God cannot be represented or possessed. Compared with the idols of the surrounding nations, God's presence was revealed in the form of an unnamed empty space flanked by two golden figures on top of a box. This throne was definitely not God. It represented the relationship between the people and the God they knew as the Living God.

By means of the image of two angels sitting on each end of the slab where Jesus' body had been, John turns our gaze to the space in language and iconography where God would be if God were to be represented amongst us. Elsewhere Williams says, God is in the grammar of our discourse, but God is at the same time free from the grammar. We are on the edge of something here and it is hard to go further. These difficulties in coming to grips with the resurrection stories are germane to the message they seek to convey. In reaching for something beyond the linguistic and symbolic powers we have, the Evangelists are showing that the survival of Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified is more than just a memory in the minds of his followers. He is not confined - to the past, or to our usual ways of understanding life. Like the God of the covenant he is unconfined and unconfined.

None of this makes speaking faith to our time any easier. Witness the encounter with Mary. She saw the empty tomb, and the angels, but none of these produce faith. As John says: for her it was still dark. In fear and distress Mary runs to tell the others who are still trapped in powerlessness and confusion. But the slow breaking in of faith begins. Unlike Lazarus who came forth bound, the grave clothes are there. If the body had been stolen, the grave clothes would have gone too. Jesus is unconfined, he is "clothed in a new form." The beloved disciple has an inkling of faith, but understanding has yet to come. The question of where the Risen One now is answered through the encounter with grief stricken Mary, but it is a slow process. She is the one who sees the two figures framing the spot where he had lain. She still believes the body has been stolen and her eyes are blind to the new reality before her. It is when Jesus the Good Shepherd calls her name that Mary "sees". Through the power of the word the darkness lifts and she enters into a transformed understanding of their relationship. Understanding does not come from the evidence: empty tombs, angels or folded grave clothes. All these are but signs of what this means. Understanding comes from what Jesus himself says to us in the power of the Spirit of life. Mary's "I have seen the Lord" is her witness to discovering that she is still held in the all embracing life of love that flows from God through Jesus Christ. And his "do not cling to me" points to the fact that this is a new reality, and he is not the possession of the Christian people. He cannot be held by us. The empty space between the angels points us to the Living God in whose trust Jesus died and now lives, for us.

It is hard to convey the full meaning of what we celebrate on Easter Day because we are dealing with the creative liberty of God, at work in the world. A creative liberty that refuses to give up on us. Christ is Risen! is not a description. It is a proclamation that God is, and is still obstinately and graciously engaged with us in our life. It is when we come to that realization, for the first time, or in a renewed sense, that we can say He is risen indeed!