

**Easter Day**  
**23/3/2008**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Acts 10:34-43**

**Psalm 118:1-2,14-24**

**Colossians 3:1-4**

**John 20:1-18**

**I have seen the Lord: Christ is risen!**

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*I have seen the Lord!* Along with John the Beloved Disciple Mary Magdalene was the closest friend of Jesus. But her faith in the resurrection did not come instantaneously. It was the first day of the week, the day of new creation. But it was dark: hostility to the light remained, and her journey to the tomb was shrouded in unbelief. Mary was not convinced by what she saw. She read the empty tomb as meaning body snatchers had been at work. The appearance of the two angels did not assuage her grief, or prompt her to resurrection faith. She even mistook Jesus for the gardener. Only when he spoke her name did she see and believe.

John is saying something deep about the relationship between the facts and faith. Mary's first, distressed testimony prompted Peter and John's journey towards faith. They were drawn to the signs and John believed, but neither of them understood. Their faith arose slowly and painfully because it was a radical and world turning realization that neither death tomb nor grave clothes could hold Jesus anymore. Their struggles do not seem strange to us. We live in a world that wants to prove resurrection by pick and shovel, or at least by empirical examination. And for many the joy of the Church's core feast is alloyed with lingering puzzlement over the truth of this celebration.

Despite the centrality of belief in the Resurrection, nowhere in the New Testament do we find a description of the event itself. The New Testament writers concentrated instead on conveying the meaning of what took place.

There is a purposeful irony in the way the New Testament writers speak about what is always out of reach. What the writers do is invite us to trust the conviction they proclaim: that Jesus who had been rejected and crucified, made himself present to the disciples three days later. These encounters were interpreted as meaning that the discarded one had been drawn into the life of God – and shares everything God has. This knowledge revolutionized their view of him, and of those who opposed him. It opened up an entirely new view of the world and it radically impacted their future.

The difficulties we find in the writings of the New Testament derive from what it means to try and say something about the presence and action of God in the world. The signs of the empty tomb and the folded grave clothes are not a proof of what happened, but they continue to draw us, and remain signs of its meaning. That is all the more so when it is realized that in the biblical tradition the glory of God is expressed in an empty space.

In this connection Rowan Williams has pointed out John's Gospel makes a 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*. The image recalls the Ark of the Covenant the portable throne on which Israel's God was invisibly enthroned, between two cherubim. Mosaic religion did not allow the worship of God in visible form, and the name of God could not be uttered. Compared with the idols of the surrounding nations, God's presence in Israel was honoured in the form of an unnamed empty space flanked by two gold figures on top of a box. The message was: the God who is known to us is Lord of all, and is not tangible and accessible and cannot be represented or possessed by us.

It may be that when John gave us the story about the two angels sitting on each end of the slab where Jesus' body had been he was he was turning our gaze to the inexpressible, to the space in language and iconography where God would be if God were amongst us. But he was also saying that the suffering, dying Jesus had been drawn into the unconfined and unconfined presence of God. At the same time the Resurrection appearances to the distraught disciples demonstrated that, in spite of Calvary, God continued to be willing gather us from the most alienated point, just as in the garden Jesus continued to love and teach Mary who was slow to understand.

The difficulties of the resurrection stories are the very stuff of the message they are trying to convey. That is why the debates that arose then are still alive today. In reaching for something that goes to the borders of our linguistic and symbolic powers, the Evangelists aimed to proclaim that the risen presence of Jesus of Nazareth was more than an idea in the minds of his followers. The empty space between the angels is not filled with a dead person, or a memory. The one who died lives to God and wherever the church seeks to confine Jesus it risks creating an idol, a tomb in which to contain him. But Jesus is not the possession of the Christian people. The relationship is the other way round. It was his encounter with the disciples that created them as brothers and sisters in the community of the Risen Christ.

On Easter day we do struggle to convey the full meaning of what we celebrate. This is difficult, but it is part of what it means to engage with the transcendent, creative liberty that is God at work in the world. The good news is this creative liberty is the foundation of life itself.

The joy of this feast comes from learning that the core of the Christian message is that, despite the worst we could do God obstinately maintains solidarity with us. The reconstitution of the fractured and despairing group of disciples is more than restored friendship. It was the formation of a community of life and hope. A people whose mission it is to share the news that Jesus has gone before us into life. With his rising a new order of life broke in amongst us. He we catch a glimpse of the promise that there are no realms of terror that lie beyond the sovereignty of Christ, and that the torturer will not triumph over his victim. Here we see that our lives are more than sound and fury signifying nothing: instead we have a place in God's will and intentions for the world. This is what we celebrate today. Resurrection signifies that at the heart of things, there is new life for us and all the world. This is God's gracious gift to us. Christ is Risen! Thanks be to God!