

## EASTER DAY – ST. JOHN THE DIVINE – 4 APRIL 2021

In this, the second year of the Church's three-year cycle of biblical readings, we hear the Easter story as told by Mark. It has been said that Mark is the gospel for post-modernists. Post-modernism, at its simplest, is suspicious of theories of pretty much everything, including religious doctrine and dogma. Postmodernists argue that you should live with loose ends, not try to tie them up, and they are distrustful of closure, believing there is always more to be said.

Mark's Easter story is the earliest of the four gospel accounts, consisting of just eight verses. They tell of the empty tomb, the young man's message that Jesus is risen, the command to tell the disciples that Jesus has **gone ahead to Galilee**, and the promise that they will meet him there. The story ends with the women fleeing from the tomb, *'for they were afraid'*. And that's all. It's a remarkably lean, understated story, which leaves so much unsaid, so many questions unanswered. Now it's true that many Bibles print a longer ending to the Gospel. But it's not found in the oldest New Testament manuscripts, and is considered by virtually all scholars to be a later addition. So what does it mean, this edgy story that subverts the happy endings some people like so much. Suppose we had never read the other gospels, never heard of Mary Magdalene in the garden, or the disciples on the Emmaus Road, or of Thomas's doubts, or Jesus offering his disciples breakfast by the lakeside. Suppose **all** we had was Mark. What kind of Easter would that leave us with? Well, maybe the sort of Easter that follows a year of a pandemic that still hasn't run its full course, and its residual uncertainty about the future.

Mark was writing for Christians at a time of persecution. To them, the words of the young man at the tomb would be deeply significant: *'Do not be alarmed. He has been raised; he is not here. He is going ahead of you to Galilee'*. Mark's fragile,

suffering church would not have misread the message that despite the resurrection, the risen Jesus wasn't coming to rescue them from their time of trial just yet. But they were to cling on to the promise that he was going ahead of them: *'there you will see him, just as he told you'*. Mark's Easter is about the Christ who is promised, even though he is not yet present. And the symbol of that promise, that certainty of meeting, is Galilee. Galilee stands for all our futures, our hopes, our longings.

Mark invites us to look again at what we mean by the truth of Easter. Easter, far from banishing our bewilderment, plunges us deeper into mystery. No neat, happy endings, where God magically puts everything right again. We have to wait for the future, for whatever 'Galilee' may come to mean. Mark warns against expecting that the joyous recognitions of John's lakeside or Luke's Emmaus are for all of us all the time. He says that there is more than one way of being an Easter people: our alleluias may be whispered rather than shouted. For him, Easter's new beginnings are promised, not yet fully present. At the empty tomb, **hope** is all that is left to us. But it's all we need.

The Welsh priest and poet R.S. Thomas says, *'He is such a fast God'*. Thomas writes about *'a room I enter/from which someone has just/gone, the vestibule for the arrival/of one who has not yet come'*. This is Mark's empty tomb, a place of bafflement, where understanding only comes with waiting. Mark's Easter is about what the NT calls *'things hoped for but not seen'*: *'he is not here'*. Mark's Easter faith is in the gaps, the silences, the hints. For him, the place of God's power is an empty space, and in his story of absence and longing, we learn that most of life is lived on this threshold between emptiness and meeting, between fear and hope, between darkness and noon, between Golgotha and Galilee. We learn that it is not knowledge that counts, but faith.

So there is no happy ending in St Mark, no closure - for a mature life does not always consist of closures and happy endings, as we know all too well. Rather, it consists of open ends, and risk, and crossing thresholds. That is why we need a message as stark and tough as Mark's: it requires us to believe in a way that sheds false hopes and illusions. It calls us to obey, in faith and hope, the summons that first rang out by Galilee, and which reverberates on every page of Mark's Gospel: *'Follow me'*. Mark's great gift to us in spelling out the nature of true discipleship is to refuse to make it too easy. He reminds us that the empty tomb is not the **answer**, but the **question**. It leads towards the edge of things, where the unpredictable leaps out at us, and we emerge shaken, silenced and changed.

It's a story, I think, that is in tune with our post-modern age with its open-endedness. Like the women, we bring to the empty tomb our own confusion, emptiness, unbelief, especially this year. Some of us may hardly know **why** we come, except that we are driven by some instinct that here is the clue to human life where meanings are uncovered and new possibilities open up before us, where hope, dread, wonder, fear and longing meet together. And this is Mark's faith, an Easter faith for ordinary days that can embrace our questions and doubts **as well as** our joys and hopes.

So as we come this Easter Day to the empty tomb, what do we expect to find? Well, in some ways, it might seem easier if we found Jesus's body lying there lifeless, wrapped up, reverently disposable, unchallenging, so that we just walk away with tears of despair. Then, we wouldn't have to make any further response to him at all: Jesus would become another piece of history that we take out, dust down, and glance at once a year, a bit like an old book on the shelf – possibly even a Bible! But Easter Day makes all of that impossible, for we **don't** find a body. Instead, we find an empty space we cannot totally explain, but which opens up limitless possibilities.

This empty space is at one and the same time awe-inspiring, mysterious, provocative and exciting. The stone has gone, and the life of Jesus goes on, a life that refuses to concede even to death itself. This glorious Easter Day opens up the possibility of transformation in **our** lives, as it has transformed countless others. And, if we embrace its promise, it can transform the world, too. The Lord is risen; he is risen indeed! Alleluia!