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Christ Church West Wimbledon
Sermon : Easter Sunday
Sunday 17th April 2021

EASTER DAY 2022

That familiar account by John of the empty tomb and the appearance of Jesus to Mary Magdalene still sends a shiver down my spine. God turning the world upside down in so many ways – not least because it was a fallen woman who discovered that the stone had been removed – and it was to Mary Magdalene that the risen Jesus appeared. God turning the world upside down. Who would have thought it? Who could have imagined it?

Jesus' gift to his most faithful, passionate friend is to make his first resurrection appearance to her. We know from all the accounts of the resurrection that Jesus looked somehow different: perhaps never more so than through the tear-filled eyes of Mary Magdalene. But he reaches through her tears and her incomprehension, into her very soul with one word: her name. In the heaven imagined by the Book of Revelation, the last book in the Bible, there is a white stone on which is inscribed our new, real name. Maybe Mary's stone simply says Mary.

So it is that still today the story of Easter has a spellbinding feel to it, even in our humanistic, post-Christian age, even to those who have lived with the yearly events of Holy Week and Easter all their lives. For millions of people the world over have long been captivated by the real Jesus – the man who healed, confronted injustice, gave a voice to the voiceless, who died and rose again – who said that it's only when you put God first, others second, and self, last – that you can truly be fulfilled as a human being.

The Church, of course, has been trying to get the message across about the real person of Jesus for generations – but people have not always heard, maybe because it is all too challenging. After all it is much easier to celebrate the birth of a baby

than to imagine that same baby to be killed at the age of 33 and then to rise from the dead.

Of course, the Gospel writers underplay the terror and hysteria, which the sight of the empty tomb must have stirred up in those who found it. Yet maybe it is no bad thing for these feelings to be stirred up in us all, for God sent his Son to save the world from itself – and we may question whether the world has ever really understood the impact of God's actions in allowing his Son not just to be killed – but to be raised up on the third day.

Yet the fact remains that throughout the whole world today, Christians are celebrating the most extraordinary event in history. Death, the most final thing we can know as humans, is the setting for 'the greatest story ever told'. Jesus of Nazareth has been raised to a kind of life never before experienced. He has a body; the scars are still visible, he talks, listens, eats. Yet he is no longer bound by space and time. In the risen Christ, we sense the stirring of that new life, full of hope and joy, freed from all the tragedy and pain of mortal life.

The Resurrection stories are also about people who are emotionally confused and drained. The exhausting events of the past week have them seeing but not recognising, wondering and agonising but not immediately able to make sense of anything. How human and reassuring for us to realise that it often takes years of living before we eventually grasp something of God's involvement in our journey and our pain. So often the evidence of his real, loving presence is staring us in the face, yet we assume any number of other factors are responsible, much as Mary assumed that Jesus was the gardener. It is likely that Peter was wallowing so deeply in his own misery that he probably wouldn't have noticed Jesus standing next to him.

But with great gentleness and courtesy, Jesus holds back on revealing the full power and vibrancy of his new life, so as to lead people – both then and now – at their own pace to recognise the astounding truth. He lets us see only what we are capable of taking in, for he loves us and has no desire to scare us or overwhelm us. Life is changed, transformed, through the empty cross – that is the powerful image for us to hold in our mind this morning as we proclaim 'The Lord is Risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia!' Amen.