

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – Easter Day – 4th April 2021

Eglise Sacré-Coeur, Oppède

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It is quite a challenge to give a talk on the resurrection of Jesus. To begin with we have four accounts of His resurrection with each of the gospels differing in the details of what happened and then we have different translations of those gospels. Would you believe that the app I use for my daily bible reading gives me a choice of sixty-one translations?

Some people have used the differences in the gospel accounts to argue that none of the accounts can be believed but I believe that these differences in the accounts argue for accepting the legitimacy of the accounts. It is well known that if you ask four people to relate their accounts of the same scene they always differ in the detail. It would be very suspicious of some sort of collusion if all the accounts agreed. And some of the details are exquisite in the authenticity they lend to the accounts. For example, in our gospel this morning we have the detail noted only in John's account that the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, was not lying with the other linen wrappings but it was rolled up, folded in a place by itself. In Mark's account we are told not only that there was an angel but he was seated on the right.

We could concentrate on the differences if we are set on disproving the fact of Jesus' resurrection but then we cannot overlook the facts that all the gospels agree on:

- Jesus died and was buried
- Several women went to the tomb very early in the morning of the first day of the week
- They found the stone rolled away and the tomb empty of Jesus' body
- An angel spoke to them
- The women fled from the tomb
- The disciples were not prepared for his death and were confused about his resurrection

And though not included in all accounts of the resurrection in all four gospels, all the gospels talk about Jesus being alive post-resurrection and appearing to many.

But let us now look at our reading this morning from the gospel of John. And I should warn you that John is the most difficult of the four gospels to understand. This is because there always seems to be a second meaning to all that John writes. His gospel is often referred to as the spiritual gospel because he often has a spiritual meaning behind the earthly meaning. He seems to be ambiguous if not enigmatic on purpose. So, with that spiritual health warning, let's go.

John's resurrection scene opens with Mary Magdalene on her way to the tomb on the first day of the week while it was still dark. This motif of darkness and light runs throughout John's gospel with darkness meaning death and the light meaning life and particularly eternal life. So, Mary sets out in the dark headed for the light. Does that give you a sense of how John writes? John does not tell us that there are maybe four or more other women with Mary. We only learn that Mary was not alone when she refers to 'we' rather than 'I' later on. On reaching the tomb Mary and her companions discover that the stone covering the entrance of the tomb has been removed. But oddly, we are not told that Mary looks into the tomb. Instead, she runs to tell Peter and John what has happened. She does not tell them what she has seen, that the stone to the tomb has been removed or the tomb is empty, but she says "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." An assumption on Mary's part and a wrong assumption at that.

At least that got Peter and John's attention for their response was immediate. They high-tailed it to the tomb with John reaching the tomb first but for some reason he also did not enter the tomb. He looked into the tomb and saw the linen lying there that Christ's body had been wrapped in. When Peter arrived, we can imagine, true to his character, Peter elbows John out of the way and dives into the tomb. John follows Peter into the tomb and we are told that "John saw and believed". We can assume that he saw the loose linens lying there but we are left to imagine what he believed. Did he believe what Mary had told them that someone had taken or stolen the body of Jesus? Grave robbing was a common occurrence in those days. John could clearly see that the body was gone but if it had been stolen why had the thief or thieves carefully folded the linen on Jesus's head? Or did John have a sudden revelation inspired by the Holy Spirit that Jesus had truly risen from the dead? If he had had this revelation,

why did he not tell Peter and Mary Magdalene particularly given the stress that Mary was experiencing? We will return to this later but if this is a mystery, the two things that we are told next are even bigger mysteries. First, John writes that they did not understand the scripture that said Jesus would rise from the dead – nor, we might add, that must include what they had heard Jesus himself say on more than one occasion. And to cap it all they then left the tomb and went home. Not to one home so that they could discuss the meaning of what they had seen but to their separate homes. Weren't they curious as to what had happened? Were they still too fearful to be seen asking questions? Were they so disappointed in the shattering of their dream on calvary that they had decided that it was all over?

I have to say in parenthesis that the men didn't distinguish themselves well from the trial of Jesus through his crucifixion to his resurrection. Judas betrayed him, Peter denied him and all of the disciples (apart from John) deserted him at his crucifixion. We have to do better guys!

If the guys had given up, Mary certainly had not. In her grief and sadness, she looked into the tomb through her tears and there saw two angels, one of whom asked why she was weeping. You would have thought it was obvious to an angel, but the angels do not have the chance of further conversation for Mary turned, probably to leave herself, only to see a man who she thought was the gardener. And then we have this wonderful moment when Mary recognises Jesus; when He says her name "Mary". In that moment, she came to know that her world had changed forever. She had experienced Good Friday, the horrible and violent death of Jesus Christ, the dashing of all of her hopes, the crushing of her faith. And she had experienced the silence of Saturday, a day of grief and mourning. On this day she had come to the tomb, seeking solace, perhaps to say a last goodbye to the friend and teacher she had known and loved, and instead her world was transformed, changed forever. To bring this scene to an end Jesus says to Mary go and tell my brothers and sisters, meaning all my disciples, not that I am risen and I am alive, but that I am leaving you. My work on earth is complete.

There is a lot in this second half of the story that we could reflect on but time does not permit. Instead, I want to go back to that puzzling verse "John saw and believed" for our belief is the very thing that the resurrection of Jesus calls into question. It is possible at this point that John and perhaps Peter too were persuaded of the fact of the resurrection, that it had indeed happened. They maybe believed that Jesus had risen from the dead but because they did not

know the Scripture, that Jesus must rise again from the dead, they did not understand the meaning of the resurrection. Knowing the fact of the resurrection is an important start, but not enough. We need also to know the meaning and the importance of Jesus' resurrection. Here are a few things that the resurrection means.

The resurrection means that Jesus was confirmed to be the Son of God.

- The resurrection means that we have assurance of our own resurrection. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, God will bring with Him those who believe in Him.
- The resurrection means that God has an eternal plan for these bodies of ours.
- The resurrection means that Jesus has a continuing ministry for he ever lives to make intercession for those who come to God through Him.
- The resurrection means that Christianity and its God are completely different, unique among world religions.
- The resurrection proves that though it looked like Jesus died on the cross as a common criminal, He actually died as a sinless man, out of love and self-sacrifice to bear the guilt of our sin. If the death of Jesus on the cross was the payment for our sin, the resurrection was the receipt, showing that the payment was perfect, fully sufficient in the sight of God the Father.

Every year I hear someone ask "when will Easter come this year?" If you hear that asked next year you can answer Easter will come when God calls your name, and you hear his voice and respond in faith. Which leads me to ask, has God called your name? Have you responded in faith? Has Easter come for you?