

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE
WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – Easter Day

17th April 2022

All Saints' Marseille

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There is a Dutch proverb that says, 'If you want to be happy for a lifetime, plant a garden.' Our chaplaincy members who are serious about gardening can surely agree! What is more reassuring than seeing something grow and flourish? 'Life begins the day you start a garden,' someone has said. Gardening is a lesson in patience and hope.

Even if we cannot plant our own garden, we could nonetheless try to spend as much time as we can in someone else's, taking in its bounty and giving thanks for all the work that has been done.

Not surprisingly, when those who took part in our Lenten group discussions were invited to share their thoughts about what gives them hope, we heard from some of them how gardens, in spring, were for them a miraculous gift, one that God offers every year as a promise that he has not given up on the world.

We are in a season of beauty, light, joy and hope, that susurrates through the veins of nature, to give earth and hearts a wake-up call: 'Winter is now past, and the spring has come! Arise, now is time for singing!' (Song of Songs 2.11-12). Spring always surprises us with the hope it brings. We gasp with delight when a landscape that appeared to be barren is now ready to burst into life.

The story of Mary Magdalene's visit to the tomb that we have just heard, a well-known story of an encounter and transformation in a garden: does it still surprise us by the hope it brings? Or, perhaps, we only listen to it wrapped in indifference, or even in darkness and hopelessness.

'Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb...' Yes, Easter begins in the darkness of fear, bewilderment, loneliness. A darkness that suffocates and erodes hope.

Yet: can you hear what I hear? Echoes of the creation story from Genesis that we read last night, at the Easter Vigil: 'In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep...'

Mary Magdalene does not know – and we do not know either - what happened during the night in the garden where Jesus had been laid in a tomb.

Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury, thinks that at Easter there was 'a tumultuous surge of divine energy as fiery and intense as the very beginning of the universe', akin to the Big Bang scientists talk about. (*Tokens of Trust*)

A hymn tries to put this mystery into words: 'Christ has risen while earth slumbers. Christ has risen where hope died'. I imagine the moment was as solemn and majestic as that of the first creation when light burst out of chaos and darkness. In the beginning, God spoke light into existence. On the first day of the week, God raised to life 'the light that the darkness cannot overcome' (John 1.5). Death has been destroyed. Hope has been restored.

Mary Magdalene didn't realise, nor will Peter and the other disciples later, that the world, as they knew it, had died in the night. What she was looking at was the first day of a new creation. In the words of one of the prayers we said on Good Friday: 'things which were cast down were raised up, and things which had grown old were made new, and all things were returning to perfection through Jesus Christ, from whom they had taken their origin'.

And then it happens: as the shades of night dissolve into dawn, Mary Magdalene comes face to face with the risen Christ and mistakes him for a gardener. Was this really a mistake?

Some of the Church Fathers spoke later of Jesus Christ's earthly ministry as the work of the gardener of the human soul, eradicating noxious vegetation of sin and planting the seeds of love for God and for neighbour.

Let us have a look at Fra Angelico's painting *Noli me tangere*, on the cover page of our service sheet: humanity was born in a garden and now is reborn in a garden. Jesus is the firstborn of this new humanity, flowering forth from the womb of the earth on Easter Morning to be the gardener of the new creation. In the words of G. K. Chesterton, 'in a semblance of the gardener, God walked again in the garden, in the cool not of the evening but of the dawn.' (*The Everlasting Man*)

Jesus is in the garden at the first light of the new week, at the first light of the new creation. He comes with new life, so that his disciples can begin to live their calling. When he calls Mary by name, he speaks light into her darkness and she can then say, 'I have seen the Lord.'

'I have seen the Lord.' – this is a first-person testimony, much more than the third person confession we make in the Creed, 'I believe that, on the third day, Christ rose again'. To say 'I have seen the Lord' is to awake to the dawn of a world transformed. To say 'I have seen the Lord' is to point out resurrection when all that seems visible is death, to point out love in the face of hate. It is to acknowledge that the risen Christ still bears the wounds of his Passion – he continues to bear the wounds of the world. If we say 'I have seen the Lord', we will bear this wounded world with him.

Here, in the new garden that the risen Christ planted for us, we can learn to perceive new life growing and flourishing even amid the sorrow and darkness of the world, in the midst of our own darkness and hopelessness. Here, in the new garden, we are known by name, just as we are. Here, in the new garden, we are sent to be signs of the new life in Christ. Here, in the new garden, we can learn that we are called to carry into the world the beauty, the peace and the hope of the world's first morning.

Arise! Now is time for singing: This is the day that the Lord has made – let us rejoice and be glad in it. (Ps 118.24)

Amen.