

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**

**WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

**Sermon – 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent – 17<sup>th</sup> March 2024**

**Eglise du Sacré-Coeur, Oppède**

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Happy Easter!

After the sombre time of Lent when Christians reflect on the events leading up to the barbaric execution of Jesus Christ on the cross, perhaps denying themselves food, or chocolate, or wine, we arrive in what seems like a blaze of sunshine to hope, new life and celebration. Chocolate surrounds us, children enjoy Easter Egg hunts and adults celebrate with a good long lunch of turkey or lamb – or a baby goat here in the south of France.

I have always found it difficult to think about the final hours of Jesus's mortal life. I am not squeamish normally, but I must admit I recoil from the very visual signs of his torture. To see a large cross made of 2 pieces of rough wood, feel the weight of it and imagine carrying that on shoulders and back torn by a whip, the big handmade nails and the crown of thorns. Garry made a crown of thorns from barbed wire for the service one year and it made me really quite queasy. Still does for that matter!

However, after the darkness and horror, after three days of grief for his followers at the time, and to an extent for us too as we journey through Holy Week, comes the joy of Jesus returning to us. We have already heard how he brought Lazarus back from the dead – and one can only imagine how much of a shock that must have been to those who witnessed a dead man tottering out of a tomb still wrapped up in his bandages. But that was just the opening scene, demonstrating the power of Jesus through God.

Jesus continues to teach us even during the critical time around his death and resurrection. It was two rich and influential men who arranged for the body of Jesus to be taken down from the cross and prepared with as much dignity and care as possible in the short time available before the Sabbath intervened – but

it was a mere woman who was first to discover that he had risen from the dead. Mary Magdalene, whose reputation was trounced for centuries afterwards, who bravely ventured out before sunrise to help perform the sad rites of burial. Women then were not considered in any way of importance or note, who couldn't give evidence in court for example because they weren't deemed credible. But she had the courage to set out in the dark despite the dangers of wild animals and robbers, and it was she who was chosen by God to be the first to discover that the huge rock that had been rolled in front of the tomb had been rolled away, and that the body had gone.

So who was this woman, so important? Mary shared her name with many other women – it was the commonest name in her time, and was differentiated from all the others by her second name of Magdalene – from her place of birth. She has been described at the apostle to the apostles, as the disciple who really understood what Jesus was saying whilst the men didn't. She was wealthy and the leader of the women who bankrolled Jesus and his disciples, following him faithfully. She wasn't a prostitute as became the popular misbelief promulgated from the Easter sermon of Pope Gregory in 591 when he muddled her in with Mary of Bethany and the unnamed sinner who anointed Jesus's feet, but a respectable woman who was to all intents and purposes the female equivalent of Peter amongst the women followers. It wasn't until 1969 that Pope Paul VI put the story straight. But there are still all manner of rumours floating around about her.

But she stood at the Cross and was there with his mother and other women when he died, and when he was lifted down. His male apostles dared not be there. I can't imagine the grief and horror those women went through, seeing their loved one die in such a horrific way. But they stayed on despite their own pain, supporting him the only way they could – just by being there.

Mary dashed off to tell Peter and probably John, that someone had robbed the tomb. It wasn't unusual in those days - the linens and spices used for burial would have fetched a good price for a grave robber. Shocked, the two men investigated for themselves, finding everything tidily folded up but no body. They were not the first see Jesus. They went home. Mary hung around, crying, outside the tomb, and whilst she might not have understood what was going on she was given the privilege of being the very first witness to see Jesus after he had risen from death. It was much later on in the day that he appeared to his

disciples, meeting together behind closed doors, nervous of what the religious leaders would do to them in their turn.

Now if the rising of Lazarus had caused a fuss, the rising of Jesus shortly afterwards was guaranteed to cause even more trouble. Anyone who claimed that Jesus wasn't dead, or really was God's chosen one and back from the dead was going to be marked out for ridicule at best and attack at worst. The religious leaders who had incited the crowd to bay for blood a few days earlier were backed into a corner. If they admitted Jesus was indeed the Messiah, then they were admitting they had killed the Son of God. That wouldn't do at all – hence the disciples meeting behind closed doors. So Mary was probably a lot safer in declaring Jesus alive than the male disciples – after all, who would believe a woman? The authorities would and did try and say that the disciples had made it all up – but had that been the case then they wouldn't have used a woman to be the first messenger – it would have undermined the whole story.

Interestingly, the prejudice continued as we see in Paul's letter to the Corinthians where he says "He was buried and was raised from the dead on the third day, just as the Scriptures said. He was seen by Peter and then by the Twelve." In Acts 10, Peter says "they put him to death by hanging him on a cross, but God raised him to life on the third day. Then God allowed him to appear, not to the general public, but to us whom God had chosen in advance to be his witnesses. We were those who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead." No mention of Mary!

But most importantly for us today, Jesus hadn't come back from the dead for a select few people - he had come back for everyone – male, female, child, Jew and non-Jew – all of creation and all of humanity, regardless of nationality, gender, colour, appearance, relationships, differences. His commandment to us was to love one another as he loved us. He had no prejudices, he came for everyone. And he has no problem in using the most unlikely of us to do his work, like he used Mary. Each and every one of us is important to him, and we all have a function, a part to play, in bringing in a new world, a heaven here on earth. Not for nothing do we pray "Lord, thy will be done on earth as in heaven" as part of the Lord's prayer. Jesus came to be with us always. We may not (and I definitely don't) understand the mystery of his death and resurrection, why he had to die such a tortured death, but like Mary, it's enough for us to believe, to cling to his words and his continuing to walk alongside us through life with all its ups and downs, the sunny days and the dark ones. And we really can thank God

for Easter Day and Christ's sacrifice to bring us new life, new hope and a new dawn on our tired, battered old world.

Happy Easter!