

## John 20: 1-18 **The empty tomb**

**EASTER DAY**, March 31st, 2024, Grenoble

readings: Acts 10: 34-43  
John 20: 1-18

### **Introduction**

It is good to be back at St Marc's, Grenoble. For those who don't know, I am a retired vicar from Edinburgh. From 2000 to 2013 Chaplain along the road in Lyon. Susie and I were here in 2019 and 20220. And Joanna was part of the congregation in 1997-98 or thereabouts.

### **Easter morning**

Today is Easter morning, a time for rejoicing; for us and for all God's people. In Grenoble; in the Diocese of Europe; around the world.

*“You're alive, you're alive, you have risen ! Alleluia !  
And the power and the glory is given, Alleluia. Jesus to you”*

So - the question I want to address this morning is: *What is the significance of the Easter event for the world and for our lives today ?* First of all, let us look at the story itself in John 20.

### **John 20: 1-18 The empty tomb**

**vv.1-2** After the account of Jesus's arrest and crucifixion [John 18-19], the story moves forward 48 hours. All four gospels tell us that some women went to the tomb where Jesus's body had been laid. John mentions only Mary Magdalene by name. But v.2 makes it clear that she did not go alone.

What they found was the disturbing sight of the stone having been rolled away. So - Mary went running to tell Simon Peter and “*the disciples Jesus loved*”, whom we take to be John himself

### **John 20: 1-18 The empty tomb**

**vv.3-9** Peter and the beloved disciples come to see for themselves. [NB Two male witnesses were required to have adequate testimony in a court of law.] The beloved disciple arrives first and peers into the tomb. Then Peter arrives and goes into the tomb. Strangely he finds the linen clothes with no body in them, and the napkin used to wrap the head neatly folded up. Then John enters, and reacts quite differently; he saw and *he believed*. [*Seeing and believing* is one of the continuing threads in John's Gospel. Jesus's followers are required to ‘*see through the eyes of faith*’.] What the beloved disciple starts to understand is that the one who is free from the constraints of death must indeed be who he claimed to be, the very Son of God.

**vv.10-17** Mary, who had been the first witness of the empty tomb, now becomes the first witness to the risen Lord. She thus combines the twin facets of the Church experience of the resurrection; the empty tomb and the appearances of the risen Lord.

As she returns to the garden, crying, she peers into the tomb and sees two angels. They ask why she is crying. And she repeats what she had said to Peter and his companion. She turns away and sees Jesus there. But she does not recognise him. Thinking that he might be the gardener. She seems to offer to take care of the body. Jesus replies with one word, **Mary**. Then, as a sheep that knows the shepherd's voice, she recognises the Lord, and responds **Rabboni**. *Don't cling onto me*, Jesus tells her. Perhaps underlining that the relationship between the Lord and worshippers will not be a physical relationship. [Though the original text might be translated, *Do not be afraid*.]

**v.18** And Mary goes to tell the disciples, “***I have seen the Lord***”. Before she can deliver the Lord's message, she has to tell them that she has seen him. Seen him - and, by inference, believed in him. Mary is bereaved. And her life is restored [as other lives will be too down the centuries] by the encounter with the risen Lord

### **Acts 10: 34-43 Peter in the house of Cornelius**

It is interesting that the non-negotiable reading today is from Acts 10. One of the most significant passages in the New Testament. Very meaningful for Susie and for me. And a key passage for ministry and mission in the Diocese in Europe.

It is a story of two men and of two dreams:

\* Cornelius, a soldier, a God-fearing man, generous, prayerful. But a Gentile. Encouraged in a vision [10:6] to send to Joppa, to summon a man named Peter.

\* Peter, one of Jesus's closest followers; preacher. But a Jew. And there was this enormous rift between Jews and Gentiles. The Old Testament clearly indicated that the Messiah was coming for all nations [Psalm 2: 7-8; 22: 27-28; Isa 2: 1-3; 42:6; 49:6]. But the Jews turned doctrine of election into favouritism; a kind of racial pride; and despised Gentiles as dogs.

### **Acts 10: 34-43 Peter's sermon**

Peter starts with a summary of what God has just taught him:

v.34 God does not show favouritism [e.g. justice for rich and poor]

v.35 principle also applies to nations; God accepts all who fear Him  
There are no racial barriers to Christian salvation

Peter gives us a historical summary of Jesus's life and ministry:

v.38 Jesus was anointed; not just oil - but with the Holy Spirit. And he went around "doing good and healing people."

v.39 Jesus was put to death by the authorities; on a tree [= Cross]

v.40-41 God raised him to life again; on the third day. Easter

### **Acts 10: 34-43 Peter's sermon**

v.42-43 Jesus commanded his followers to preach gospel:

\* to testify about the incarnate, crucified, & risen Jesus

\* to tell people about forgiveness of sins; new life in Christ

Marvellous summary of the Gospel; leading to repentance and baptism.

While Peter was speaking, the Holy Spirit came upon them all [v.44].

If God had already baptised them with the gift of the Holy Spirit, then Peter realised that he too could only baptise them [v.47].

It is, as John Stott and David Smith and others have pointed out, a story as much about the conversion of Peter as the conversion of Cornelius. Mission described as '*crossing boundaries for the sake of the gospel*'.

As many people in this congregation will know, it is a key missionary principle that: ***Cross-cultural mission involves risks***

\* in cross-cultural work the missionary teacher becomes a learner

\* in sharing the gospel our understanding [image] of God is enlarged

### **Easter: for the church and the world**

The empty tomb is not by itself the whole Gospel. Complemented by the Resurrection appearances; the focus of readings in coming weeks. But the empty tomb is a powerful symbol of ***Christian hope***; that Jesus has won a victory over death, characterised as 'the last enemy'.

In a gloomy world, where people are burdened by many things - debt, problems at work, unemployment, broken relationships; to say nothing of global warming, and lying politicians, and conflicts in the Middle East and the Ukraine - ***hope is a powerful testimony***. The worst experience of my life was the death of our lovely and much loved daughter just 15 months ago. The only thing that sustains us is the promise that she [and we] will share in Jesus's new life.

### **Easter: for the church and the world**

As Jürgen Moltmann emphasises in his seminal work, *The Theology of Hope*, Christian hope rests on the Easter story. Christian faith must start with the resurrection of Jesus. “*A Christian faith that is not resurrection faith can be called neither Christian nor faith.*” This is the Easter faith of the disciples. And the reality of the resurrection is such that it compels proclamation to all peoples.

In terms of *promise*. “*The Christian hope for the future comes from a specific, unique event - that of the resurrection and the Easter appearances of Jesus Christ.*” The appearances of the risen Lord were experienced “*not as blissful experiences of union with the divine*” [!], but as “*a commission to service and mission in the world.*”

As Herbert McCabe and Moltmann observe: the early church had little to say about ethics and a great deal to say about eschatology. But with churches in today's world it is often the other way around. The Church of England issues reports on human sexuality on an almost weekly basis. And the Church Times seems to write about little else. But ... we seem to have very little to say about what happens when we die. And about what happened when Jesus died.

And so this is the Easter faith which we are compelled to proclaim:

“... let the Church with gladness, hymns of triumph sing,  
for her Lord now liveth, death hath lost its sting.

Thine be the glory, risen conquering Son,  
endless is the victory, Thou o'er death hast won.”

**Amen.**