

'So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. And behold, Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshipped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me.'" (Matthew 28:8-11)

Well, what do you do? It is Sunday morning. The Sabbath has finished and the moment the sun allows, you are on a mission; before anyone else gets there, you and one or two of your friends have a date; at a tomb.

Now I say a date, because this was an act of love for one they had loved and who had loved them, but who was no longer. There was a body to be adored, one last time, and then embalmed in the traditional manner with spices before the stone is rolled back in place. One last time and sealed before that person's followers sit down and work out what to do with the rest of their lives. Perhaps they could start a new movement in his name and memory, following his teachings and trying to persuade people that loving God and your neighbour as yourself is a great way to live your life for as long as you have it.

First of all though, for the ladies, there is a problem of the stone at the entry to the tomb. How are they going to move it? Maybe the guards could help if they are still there. Unlikely.

The women approach in trepidation. Call it an answer to prayer if you like, but suddenly: 'there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men.' (vv.2-4)

What do you do with that? What would you be thinking? I mean, you've seen some stuff with Jesus. Even on the Friday there had been an earthquake, but this, this was close-up and personal. What do you do with that?

You could try: 'Hello'! There is an angel in front of you watching over the tomb and 'Hello' is a great conversation starter. The first thing he says is: 'Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified' (v.5). The conversation continues: 'He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him. See, I have told you.' (vv.6-7)

Looking at the empty tomb, the women would have had a hundred ideas going around in their heads as to what had taken place since Jesus' crucifixion. That was a real event and witnessed by many, both followers and opponents of Jesus. Even today, only a fool would say the crucifixion of Jesus did not take place as it is a well-documented event, not only by Christians, but by secular Roman sources of the time too, from writers who had no link with Jesus or Judaism at all and thus no axe to grind.

Continued fear of the Jewish or Roman authorities (as followers of a criminal) was not the women's only preoccupation either. Their main thought was 'What had happened to Jesus' body?'

The angel had continued: 'He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay' (v.6). What did this mean? What had become of Jesus? What did 'risen' mean? If Jesus was not there, where was he?

The angel continued again:

'Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him. See, I have told you' (v.7).

What did all this mean? The ladies remembered perhaps that Galilee was the place where it all started, where Jesus' public ministry began with the meeting of the disciples. Did they remember though what Jesus himself said would happen in Matthew 26:32: 'But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee'? Could this be true? That Jesus had risen from the dead and is going on to meet the disciples?

Now the women really do have a mission; to run to go and tell the disciples of their discovery. They didn't have to wait for Jesus to get Galilee to have an encounter with him, for who should they meet on the way? Jesus himself.

His first words are not: 'Hi guys. Surprise!' Rather, he says: 'Do not be afraid'; reinforcing what the angel had already said to them.

This repeating of a phrase is a typical Jewish mechanism to give emphasis to something, in this case 'Do not be afraid'. So why should the women not have been afraid then and why should we not be afraid now, today, 2000 odd years later?

For the same reason. We don't have to wait to get to the other side of eternity to have an encounter with Jesus either. Through faith and prayer, the reading of the Bible and with the help of the Holy Spirit, we can have a date with Jesus ourselves. All we have to do is seek him and keep seeking him. We can have conversations with him and be attentive to his response, because there will be responses to prayer, if we become attentive listeners.

'Do not be afraid' was the watchword for Jesus' followers at this point. It is the same for his followers today. The world is full of danger and ungodliness, but in the darkness the light of Jesus still shines in the hearts of those who love, care for and follow him. It will not be extinguished, nor will it be overcome. 'Do not be afraid' is our reminder that, no matter what path our earthly life follows, if we have Christ going before us, we will meet him when our time comes.

'Do not be afraid'. He is risen; we will be risen, Alleluia!