

**Sermon**

Sunday 4 April, 2021  
Easter Sunday

Lesson                      St Mark 16: 1 – 8

In the poetry and majestic language of the King James Version, we read:

And when the sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, had bought sweet spices, that they might come and anoint him.

And very early in the morning the first day of the week, they came unto the sepulchre at the rising of the sun.

At dawn, at the rising of the sun, the women made their way to the tomb. The Gospels open their Resurrection dramas in a similar fashion: it was ‘dawning’, ‘at early dawn’ and ‘when the sun had risen’. Of course, at the very beginning of Matthew’s Gospel, we read of the shining star of Bethlehem burning in the night sky. In the Gospel of Luke, in the earliest chapters, the evangelist said of Jesus: ‘the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness’. In the Gospel of John, Jesus is ‘the light of the world’. Whatever else the Resurrection may be, it is an epic of light overcoming darkness: they came unto the sepulchre at the rising of the sun!

Last month, Pope Francis made an historic visit to Iraq. Wearing a face-covering like you and me, he stepped on to Iraqi soil in what was the first papal visit to the country. Iraq is home to one of the oldest Christian communities in the world. Ur, the birthplace of Abraham, the father of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, is in southern Iraq. On his trip, the Pope prayed among the ruined churches in Mosul. At one event, a cross was erected in honour of the visit, a cross carved from wooden pews taken from those churches.

Within a few hours of his plane landing, Pope Francis stood at the altar in the Cathedral of Our Lady of Salvation. The mood was sober. He said, ‘We are gathered in this Cathedral ... hallowed by the blood of our brothers and sisters who paid the ultimate price of their fidelity to the Lord ...’. Just over ten years ago, in October 2010, al-Qaeda gunmen and suicide bombers killed 58 people at Mass. The Pope had gone to Iraq as a ‘pilgrim of peace’; he was greeted at the airport by the Prime Minister. In the Cathedral, the Pope stood at the altar, the table, to share bread and wine. Is it a sign of resurrection, of light overcoming darkness, that from the bombs

and blood of terrorism, the Christian community in Iraq, though still oppressed, shared the Sacrament once again in the Cathedral?

In the Gospels, there are early hints of resurrection: the raising of the son of the widow of Nain; the raising of the daughter of the synagogue leader, Jairus; the ‘raising’ of Peter’s mother-in-law; and the raising of Lazarus. The American Episcopalian priest, Barbara Brown Taylor, tells of her trip to Bethany on the southern slopes of the Mount of Olives, and the tomb of Lazarus. The grave is a small, round opening in a rock wall down at knee level. Taylor says that one needs gymnastic ability to bend double and crawl in. She writes:

If it really is Lazarus’s tomb, then he did not come out of it like a man walking out of prison. He came out of it like a baby being born again – first his poor wrapped face, then his bandaged hands, and finally his feet.

Rather vividly, Barbara Brown Taylor describes the raising of Lazarus as being ‘born again’. Resurrection is to be born again: it is to enter new life. The troubled Christian community in Iraq has

perhaps been 'born again' but what of resurrection, spiritual renewal, on our own journey?

Last Sunday, I watched a documentary on BBC Four called, 'Brotherhood: The Inner Life of Monks'. It told the story of the monastic community in Leicestershire: Mount St Bernard Abbey. Alongside some novices, we met monks who had lived in the monastery for 14, 31, 32, 64 and 65 years. Some monks moved around on mobility scooters or used stairlifts to ascend stairs. The oldest member of the community was 91. One member spoke of living with dementia. He said, 'I can't remember things that have happened', yet, movingly, he felt himself to be in God's hands, perhaps now more so than ever.

For me, what was most striking and most memorable, was the opening scenes of the programme. The programme began with an interview with Br Liam Strahan. Brother Liam had been in the monastery for over 60 years; he was now on his deathbed. With heavy chest movements, at times struggling to breath, he spoke

calmly and with clarity of thought. He said, in the early days at the monastery, prayer was something you did. Now, he said, ‘I don’t pray.’ Br Liam told the interviewer:

Prayer is the atmosphere in which I live. My whole life is just a prayer to God. You understand? I don’t say prayers ... The presence of God is something that I’m aware of all the time. I’m just living in the presence of God; that’s my prayer.

Later in the programme, we saw Br Liam wrapped in white linen cloth and laid in the brown earth, in his grave in the grounds of the monastery. He had said that he lived in the presence of God. In the simplicity and sureness of his voice, one could hear and see and believe in what it means to be ‘born again’.

Resurrection is not something that happens at the hour of our death. Living in God, with God, is possible now in this life. The German mystic, Meister Eckhart, said ‘Eternity is now’. The Scottish mystic, Matheson of Innellan, said that resurrection after death makes no sense because we possess God’s immortality now. Matheson said of

God, 'The power of Thy presence is the power of my resurrection, the certitude of my immortality'. He taught:

Teach me that my immortality is not to come, that it is here, that it is now. Teach me that the life eternal is not merely the life *beyond* the grave, but the life on this side of the grave. Reveal to me that I am *now* in eternity ...

What does resurrection, what does Easter, mean to you? Is it a community, bombed and bruised, rising to break bread? Is it a paradise, a healing, after death? Or is it the cultivation, nourishment and maturation of life with the Divine *now*?

Given the tragedy and pain of some deaths and the devastation that loss can sometimes bring, it is too much ever to claim that death is nothing. For me, death is a doorway into whatever mystery lies beyond, a doorway through which we walk not *to* God, but *with* God, with the One who has held us and loved us from the very beginning. God's eternal embrace of us, God's encircling of us, is not dependent on how good we are or how spiritual or clever. Eternity is now; tasted now. What do you believe? Like the women, journey yourself to the tomb! Amen.