

Easter Sunday 20th April 2-014

Matthew 28.1-10; Acts 10.34-43; Col. 3.1-4

May I speak in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen

It was as shocking as it was unexpected. That's how a tragic event in Scotland was described in a news bulletin on the radio yesterday morning ... words that could be equally applied to the ferry tragedy currently unfolding in South Korea. The raw grief we have seen on people's faces in recent days has been heartbreaking to see . Their grief is manifold. The loss of their loved one – who seemed so full of life and vitality – and the loss of their hopes and dreams *for* them and *with* them.

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As *must* have been, for the disciples of Jesus, his persecution and death upon a Roman cross. And with his death, the end of all their hopes and dreams.

According to Maggie Dawn, the author of a Lent book I have been reading*, we need to understand the depth of the grief of Good Friday, to realise the joy that was Easter Day.

It's true, that Jesus had several times tried to warn them that he would be killed, and *even* that, after 3 days, he would rise again, but Mark, in his account, tells us “they didn't understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him” (Mk 9.32).

They were numb with grief and – whether it be the women, the disciples in the upper room, or the two on their way to Emmaus, we can see, can't we, from their reactions, their questions, their body language, they had absolutely no expectation of it.

The idea of the resurrection challenges us, too, doesn't it, especially in this scientific age, when the focus is so much on what can be scientifically proven or disproven ... it's not always easy to justify why we believe or even to fully grasp it ourselves. And sometimes we're a little nervous of exploring it further, in case we find that it explains our faith away.

And I have to admit – that was my fear when I started training to be a Reader in this church. In one of my earliest assignments, I was asked to compare the four Gospels,

and was very much afraid that studying them in detail – would cast doubt on all I believed.

In the midst of that process, I read a book by Frank Morison, called “who moved the Stone”. In it he tells how he set out to demonstrate that the resurrection was a myth. Instead he was surprised by the unexpected, and became convinced of its truth. Lew Wallace, a lawyer, was another. Indifferent to religion, he was so challenged by meeting an atheist on a train, that he determined to examine the facts for himself. “The result” , he said, “was the story of Ben Hur, and the absolute belief in God and the Divinity of Christ”.

By having the courage to look ... and see for themselves ... they discovered a new and unexpected truth.

But let’s go back to our reading today from Matthew’s Gospel. This is one of those occasions when it’s hard to focus on just one reading, as we are so aware of the others ... each of which brings a different insight ... a different perspective .

It’s a bit like, perhaps, going up in the London Eye ... as the wheel moves round, you have a continually changing view of the buildings and the landscape, which together give you a more complete picture. I think the Gospels are a bit like that, and whilst the key point is the same, it will be addressed from a different perspectives.

For example, it is only Matthew, who tells us that the Chief Priests and the Pharisees asked Pilate to have the tomb sealed and guarded, for fear the disciples would steal the body. This may well reflect the fact that, at the time he was writing, rumours were rife that the disciples had done just that.

Significantly, though, all the Gospels are in agreement that the first to come to the tomb on that first day of the week were the women. It was they who watched him die, who saw where he was laid and it was to them that Jesus first appeared. This, in itself, was extraordinary, and another reason for us to believe in its truth. Women were seen as unreliable witnesses. No-one, inventing this story, would have chosen women as witnesses to such a key event.

For a moment, let us visualise these two women coming to the tomb on that first Easter Sunday morning ... their downcast faces, their heavy tread, their hearts filled with grief and pain and loss ...

We say seeing is believing, don't we but curiously, not one of the gospels speaks of seeing the resurrection ... but of witnessing the empty tomb. Both the guards and the women witnessed it ... and yet reacted differently to it. The guards fainted in fear ... whilst the women, accepted the invitation to look and see where he was laid... No-where does it say that the stone was moved to allow Jesus to rise – but to enable those who dare, to look and see.

According to John's Gospel, the women were distraught because they thought someone had stolen his body. That, in itself, tells us that they clearly had no expectation of the resurrection.

But, on seeing the evidence for themselves, they left the tomb quickly, to tell their friends. I can't help thinking that their minds would have been full of all sorts of questions ... but, it was *only* as they set off in obedience to the words of the angel, with a mixture of fear and joy, that they met the risen Jesus. And maybe that's a clue for us.

We know that Jesus appeared to his disciples and followers in different places and different ways over the next 40 days leaving them in no doubt that he had risen to new life – not the life of Lazarus ... who would one day die again ... but a new eternal life ... a life when he would, in due time, see God face to face.

Like them, we are invited, with all our questions, doubts and fears ... to look at the evidence of the empty tomb ... and to ask ourselves ... what *other* than the resurrection could have caused the amazing transformation of those first disciples - who had fled in terror when he was arrested – who sat behind locked doors after his death for fear of the Jews – and yet, whose powerful testimony brought the church into being.

When you think about it, *that's* where the *real* evidence lies – for without their testimony, borne out in their profoundly changed lives, not *one word* of our New Testament could *ever* have been written.

Christ is risen indeed, hallelujah!

A very happy Easter to you all

*Giving it Up by Maggie Dawn.