

*Sermon preached by Revd Ross Fishburn  
St Paul's Canterbury  
Easter Day  
Sunday 17 April 2022*

Have you ever noticed that we don't have any stories of what happened in the tomb when God raised Jesus from the dead? Not in the gospels and not in art. The raising of Jesus itself is hidden from us.

What we **do** have a two different sorts of story. The New Testament gives us empty tomb stories and appearance stories. Today the gospel reading gives us both sorts of story.

First we have an empty tomb story. Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb and finds the stone rolled away. So she finds Peter and John (who is referred to as the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved) and they run together to see what has happened. John reaches the tomb first, looks in to the tomb and sees the grave clothes lying there, nice and tidily rolled up, but no body. But he doesn't go in. Peter does go in and sees the same thing. The John goes in to the tomb. They don't understand what has happened. (The gospel writer tells us that they don't understand the scripture that he must rise from the dead). But even if he doesn't understand John sees and believes. I'll come back to that bit.

All the Easter stories will have this element of strangeness to them, of something that cannot be quite understood or grasped. I guess that shouldn't surprise us.

So John and Peter go back home. They have seen an empty tomb and not understood.

Second story (or part two of the one story if you like):an appearance story. Mary Magdalene is waiting there and as she looks into the tomb there has suddenly appeared a small detachment of angels in white. We have the touching exchange

about her wanting to find the body that seems to have been taken away. Then someone appears who Mary thinks must be a gardener. Maybe he knows who has taken the body away. But of course it is Jesus unrecognised at first. He reveals himself by calling Mary by name. Jesus is known to be alive because he has appeared to Mary.

Two different sorts of story wrapped up together, an empty tomb and an appearance. But no-one understands. They are simply left with this inexplicable experience that Jesus is alive again after he had died and been buried.

As a side point it is interesting to note that John tells the story with Mary Magdalene as the one who first encounters Jesus. A woman, not one of the inner circle of the twelve, not even John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, who is a special focus of this gospel which bears his name, probably written for a community he founded, and which continues to revere him. No, it's Mary. Who is the first one given the apostolic mission of telling the others the news. Mary, who many will call the apostle to the apostles.

But I want to focus more on the point that no-one understands. Note carefully that we are told John saw and believed. But then it immediately tells us that neither he nor Peter did not understand the scripture that Jesus must rise from the dead. He believes even if he doesn't understand. That is significant.

You see Easter is a deep mystery, which is perplexing and beyond our grasp, even when we know the scriptural expectation that Jesus must rise. Even today with our hindsight, with knowing the end of the story even while we are telling it, I suspect we don't fully understand and may never do so. That is why there are so many references to people not recognising Jesus throughout the Easter gospels, This is a mystery, such a rich phenomenon that it is just outside our comprehension and understanding.

But like John, people come to believe.

This speaks to us of the difference between belief and understanding. The encounters with Jesus don't happen with the mind, or even with the eyes, but rather they happen with the heart, or whatever we want to call the centre of the person. Mary Magdalene's eyes and mind tell her that she is meeting the gardener, because the mind is trying to make sense of what is beyond understanding, or is taking places in the gaps between what seem to be the facts. Only when the heart is engaged by hearing the voice of Jesus does she open herself to this new reality beyond understanding, that Jesus is alive again. Believing is about faith. I have often said that faith is not about what happens in the head; it's not about what we think, but it happens in the heart, in the centre of the person. For faith is essentially about trust.

So, in these two sorts of stories about the risen Jesus, we remember stories that taken together give us the experience that the first Christians express their trust that Jesus was alive and in their midst, whether they could understand it or not.

Of course this isn't just about the early Christians. We keep telling these stories of the empty tomb and the appearances of the risen Jesus to express our faith that Jesus is alive and in our midst still. Easter is not just a once upon a time experience, but is the heart of the present experience of the church, that the love and the power and the life of Jesus is still alive and present in the church today. That's why we dedicate 50 days of our churches year to telling the stories, and we keep signing the great Easter word Alleluia. Because ***we are Easter people, and Alleluia is our song.***