

GOSPEL READING: John 20.1-18

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.' Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went towards the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of

Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' She said to them, 'They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.' When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?' Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.' Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabbouni!' (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, 'Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." ' Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

I've heard a lot of Easter sermons over the course of my life. Mostly way too long of course! It does mean I could probably give you 20 convincing reasons to believe in the resurrection of Jesus. And I could probably tell you that we should all feel very happy about it. And, of course, we are!

As a child I grew up with the idea that the resurrection was a happy ending to a confusing story. I couldn't understand why Jesus had to die in the first place, when he could have just avoided it. And all that stuff about dying for my sins, I reckoned was too young to have done a whole lot of sinning.

And anyway, why couldn't God just forgive us if he wanted to? Why did it take Jesus dying?

Over the years I've developed a growing sense of unease with neat and tidy explanations of the Easter story. It's obviously hugely important to us. But what, actually, is it all about? How is it relevant to us today? And does it ever really touch our hearts? Can it change us?

Let's go back to the scene in our Gospel reading, and the main character, Mary Magdalene.

Now women don't have high profiles in the Bible narratives. So, when they do get mentioned, we need to pay attention. All we really know about Mary's previous life was that Jesus had cast seven demons out of her. In the Jewish tradition, the number 7 symbolises totality or completion, so we can imagine that Mary had experienced intense emotional and psychological suffering. Jesus had, literally, restored her to life. And from then on, she never left him. She had been seen, and loved, and healed; and from that point she was all in as a disciple of Jesus.

And now we find her in the garden, in the place of death. She comes to the tomb to

demonstrate her love for Jesus one last time; to anoint his body. And when she finds it empty, she is distraught. In a way, she has returned to the place where she started, absolute hopelessness. Darkness has returned to her life.

Her first thought is to find a couple of the other disciples. Being men, they might be able to find out what happened. And they arrive and take a look at the scene. Oh, the body's disappeared, they think. How strange! That's sad. Wonder what that's all about. Well, anyway, nothing to see here, may as well go back home. And off they trot.

Mary on the other hand stays in the place of death, at the tomb, fully experiencing grief and despair. Nothing is left of Jesus except a few grave clothes. But she can't bring herself to just go back home. She is utterly bereft.

But she's not alone.

She is visited by angels. She, of course, probably didn't realise they were angels. But they did something really significant for her. They asked her why she was crying. They gave her the space to fully voice her pain and despair. To say, out loud, what was going on in her heart. And that can be really healing.

To be heard without judgement and without people trying to fix us or provide answers. To have someone present in our pain.

And she turns and sees someone else. And again, she's given the space to articulate her pain. She doesn't know who it is, and she doesn't care. All she wants is to care for Jesus one last time. To love him in the only way left for her.

Recognition comes only as Jesus speaks her name. And in an instant, everything changes; not just for her, but for all of us too.

Love has come again. It came in the place of death. It came in the form of a living body, the body of Jesus. It came as her name was spoken. It came because she was seen, and known, and loved. And her life was restored. She was transformed.

Mary was the first one to see the risen Jesus, because she stayed in the place of death. And she stayed because she loved. She was the first to announce the resurrection. "I have seen the Lord!" she said. She was the first person to preach, and her congregation was the rest of the disciples!

Love is at the very heart of the Easter story. Love is the beginning of transformation. We are here to give and receive love. It doesn't get any more complicated than that. But living it out doesn't come easily for us.

It begins when we first recognise Jesus calling each one of us by name; knowing us; seeing us for who we really are; and loving us. The more we understand how beloved we are, how precious; the more we experience of the love of God; the more we are changed. We love because he first loved us.

And in loving, we bring new life to others.

This can feel huge, daunting. But it doesn't have to be. Loving might simply mean smiling at someone and saying hello. It could be asking them how they are doing, and really listening when they tell you. It could be a small act of service, or a word of encouragement. This is the kind of community we seek to be; however imperfectly we succeed. A family where love grows and is nurtured. Mother Teresa once famously said: "Do ordinary things with extraordinary love".

There are those among us who do just that. Do ordinary things for us, often hidden from plain sight. And they do it with love. Love for

this church family, this community. And love for God.

If we are to share in the resurrection, we are to be agents of love in this world. Because love brings life.

We know this. We know what hatred and fear look like; and we are here to subvert it with gentleness and care for our brother and sister human beings. We are part of a conspiracy of love.

Resurrection isn't instant. It's not a magic trick. Resurrection takes time to grow, and it begins in the tomb, hidden in the place of death.

We see resurrection in our world all the time; we just need to notice it. It happens every time we let love shape who we are. It happens in all the ways; large and small; that people act from love. Resurrection happens every day, and it's rooted in the astonishing love of God for each one of us.

Amen.