

A Sermon for Easter Day 2020

Alleluia! Christ is Risen! *He is risen indeed! Alleluia!* you all full-throatedly reply. Or perhaps not in these difficult times. You might like to have a go now, and if you can manage it, however quietly, it will probably help...

Alleluia! Christ is Risen! *He is risen indeed! Alleluia!*

But it ain't easy. Like Jeremiah, the author of our Old Testament Reading who saw Jerusalem destroyed by the Babylonians and the people taken off into exile, you are probably sensing destruction and death all around. Lament may be your mood – “we've lost so much,” one of you said to me; and your heart's desire may like Israel just be for it all to be over; for a rest.

In the face of these feelings Jeremiah looks back to the time that Israel spent in the wilderness and hears God speak to him that just as He was with them then, and led them through to find their rest in the Promised Land, so in his unending love he will do the same now, and Jerusalem and the nation and all its families will live again.

4 Again I will build you, and you shall be built,
O virgin Israel!
Again you shall take your tambourines,
and go forth in the dance of the merrymakers.
5 Again you shall plant vineyards
on the mountains of Samaria;
the planters shall plant,
and shall enjoy the fruit.
6 For there shall be a day when sentinels will call
in the hill country of Ephraim:
'Come, let us go up to Zion,
to the Lord our God.'

That is the promise we see fulfilled in the Messiah or Christ – they mean the same – that we know and celebrate today as Jesus, the conqueror of death and our Risen Lord. Alleluia! Christ is Risen! *He is risen indeed! Alleluia!*

So yes, we are living in the middle of a long and difficult novel or film, as it were, with gut-wrenching predicaments at every turn. But we have been allowed to see the end of the story, the last page, the final scene, and it really does all turn out all right in the end. The God who has made us and saved us is its Author, and by his love and grace and power all, as Mother Julian of Norwich said all those years ago, all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.

Holding on to all that can be difficult when there is so much we don't understand, and when our emotions are all over the place too. But you know, it was just the same for the first disciples, as we see in our Gospel reading, and look what God managed to make out of them in the end!

Neither St Peter nor St John, the reading tells us - despite all Jesus' teaching, over several years, in person - have yet really understood what the Scriptures say about the

Resurrection. Good news of a sort for baffled sermon-listeners and bible-studiers everywhere I suppose! St John runs to reach the tomb, but then hesitates to go in. Perhaps he is afraid of what he will find. St Peter does go in, and does see that the body has gone – but doesn't believe Jesus has risen. Finally, John plucks up courage and does go in, and does believe – but still doesn't understand, and just goes home, dumbstruck, to think it all over.

That, though, is not quite the end of the story, is it? One more disciple comes to visit the tomb, Mary Magdalene – and she has the courage to then go and tell the others what she has seen (no-one else was there to see it, it must be her account we have, which perhaps makes her the first evangelist!). And what she tells us is helpful too.

She too is short of understanding. She looks in and sees the body has gone, and even two angels. But she cannot get beyond her sense of loss for the Lord she loved and whose body she just wants to see and touch. No thought of resurrection in her mind yet. Then she actually sees Jesus but doesn't realise who He is, and just thinks he has taken the body away. Where is it? Let me take it!

Only when Jesus speaks does the penny drop. She turns to him and says, "Teacher!" She reaches out to touch Him, wants to cling to Him. Do you know the feeling? Have a look at this famous painting of the scene by Titian and be there with Mary and Jesus for a moment.

<Look at picture>

But then it is time for Mary to move on and for us to move on too. However strong the urge to cling, there is good news to share. There is love shown to us to show to others. There is life given to us to give to others. Look how the picture is divided by the tree. It's deliberate. Jesus must ascend to heaven and be divided from us physically for now. Mary must turn and go back to the city and bear witness to what she has seen. Can you imagine how sheepish the introvert and moody St John felt when extravert Mary bounded up to him full of the faith he had struggled to find. No wonder she is called the apostle to the apostles. And it must have turned John round. After all he went on to write a Gospel and to put Mary's story in it.

Part of the good news for us is that even in and even because of this awful pandemic, we have seen people touched and turned round. All those NHS volunteers. St John volunteers too going out in ambulances across the country to help take the strain. Our local Mothers' Union emergency store mobilised to provide bedding for new homes for the homeless. The men of our benefice finding their voice in an online group to watch out for each other and share need. People like us starting to pray not just in church but in our homes. Countless small acts of kindness and pastoral care, rebuilding a sense of community that seemed on the point of extinction.

So, whether with a great shout or a small whisper, with a surge of joy or a lump in our throat, Alleluia! Christ is Risen! is our message and *He is risen indeed! Alleluia!* is our reply, as we go on now to live out the lives God has given us as the people of Christ and of His Resurrection, the bearers of Good News in word and in deed to the world around us.



Titian, Noli me Tangere (National Gallery CC licence)