

Easter Day 12 April 2020 Cathedral Service (pre-recorded) John 18: 1-24

Alleluia! Christ is Risen! He is Risen Indeed! Alleluia

In the midst of all we are living through today, how do we see the resurrection, the reality and truth of God's presence opened for us by the Resurrection of Jesus? Where do we see Resurrection? Where is God in Christ present? And maybe we are asking out of our own suffering and grief, with Mary's grief-laden despair, "where have you laid my Lord?"

Large parts of the world are paralysed by the coronavirus pandemic. As the numbers of sick and dead continues to increase, we are shut in our homes, we cannot touch, we have to keep our distance if we go out to shop or work, we cannot visit those who are sick, many cannot go to work, the economy is facing a crisis that has not been seen since the second world war, or even before. Domestic violence and abuse have risen sharply, people are plunged into poverty, mental illness is on the rise.

The dramatic measures imposed in many parts of the world that have had this impact, have been put in place because for a significant number of people across the world, the disease is dangerous and even deadly. It took a while, but now we have realised that this can be lethal especially among particular groups of people.

We have become focussed on the reality and closeness of death, and that changes the way we see. We all are joined those for who live daily close to death, through conflict, persecution and poverty. We are together being faced with the question, what is life, what does life mean? Who are we now? What is really important now?

We are facing death, and not just death of people, but death, at least for a while, of a way of life, of dreams, of hopes, of plans. The pandemic is forcing us to see differently.

And in the midst of this profound awareness of death, where do we see resurrection?

If we follow Mary Magdalene, follow her attentively and carefully, I believe through her experience, we see three dimensions of where resurrection is, where we see resurrection, here for us today.

We join Mary Magdalene, first at the Cross. She is facing death, the agonising, excruciating death of the one she loved so much, who had given her meaning and purpose and direction for her life. And now her life, her dreams and hopes are dying, with the one who was dying on the cross. And she could offer him no help, no comfort, he was out of reach, she could not touch him, hold him, he died separated from her, apart.

She sits and weeps with all who through this pandemic, have borne and will bear the loss of loved ones, out of reach, neither touched nor held as they breathe their last breath.

Now it is early on the first day of the week, after the sabbath, and while it is still dark, Mary Magdalene slips out, careful not to be seen, and hurries quietly through the shadows of the narrow streets to the tomb, to be as close as she can to her dead Lord.

And here her grief and distress is compounded, where the last breath of solace leaves her, when she sees the tomb stone removed and the body gone. In shock she fetches his two closest companions, and they come and look inside and with barely a word to her, run back to the others.

She is left, desperately wondering where her Lord's body is. In her distress maybe we find her companionship again, wondering in all that we are facing, where is he? In all these inconsolable moments, where is our Lord?

It is then she notices the gardener. I have next to me a copy of Graham Sutherland's extraordinary painting that you can see in Chichester Cathedral. Mary in the garden meeting the gardener – a rather gangly and muscular gardener, with a battered gardener's hat.

How extraordinary that it is the gardener that she sees. The one who is always around, in the background, just getting on with what he has to do, taken for granted by people who just sort of assume the garden looks after itself. It is he that in her distress Mary sees.

And we know it is the Lord, here in a guise she had not imagined, and, alive. Alive, active and present.

And in these days whom is it we have noticed, has the world noticed, whom we have not noticed before? Whom have we seen and been relieved to see over and over again, as we bear this dreadful time?

The nurses, the doctors, the ambulance drivers, the hospital porters, the health care administrators, the supermarket checkout staff, the teachers, the food producers, the parents caring for their children, the delivery drivers, the bus and train drivers, the care home staff, indeed the clergy, all the saints and angels who suddenly we realise are not only truly important now, but whose work has always been truly important. Just we didn't really notice.

Where is resurrection for Mary – she does not know it yet, but resurrection is the gardener. Where is resurrection for us? Resurrection is every person whose care, skill, dedication, strength and self-giving, is bringing help and healing in these times, and enabling people to cope. They are resurrection.

Resurrection is seeing differently, seeing the real reality of God, and though we may forget this in the future, right now, that is how we are seeing, and that is how we are seeing these many, many people. These are the meek who will inherit the earth. And these are the people Jesus always cherished.

Resurrection is political, it is about the kingdom of God here on earth – it points to a re-ordered world, different priorities, different values. And that re-ordering is not just in our gratitude and our weekly applause, but in valuing people for what they do, so that there is always enough protective equipment, that there is always support, that there is always recognition, not taken for granted in a world whose priorities have become fatally distorted.

We see it now, and then let us help what we see now continue to be reality, God's reality, in the face of the forces that will undoubtedly want to drag us back to their own distorted world. Where is resurrection? Here is resurrection, the first dimension, a differently ordered society.

And now the gardener addresses Mary by name, and it is this point she recognises him – Christ in the guise of one she had taken for granted, calls her, and now she sees resurrection, receives resurrection.

She has been lifted out of her despair with a word of recognition, of love, called by name. Seeing resurrection is personal as well as political. Our worlds are changed, our seeing is changed, when we hear him call us, call our name, when we come to know that he knows us and loves us.

Resurrection is the voice down the phone calling our name, reaching us in our grief and pain, calling to us in love, not trying to make it better in well meaning explanations, but simply calling us lovingly by name – with a voice that echoes that of Jesus to Mary – no, more than that, it is Jesus' voice reaching to us in our grief.

Or it is the voice inside that as we live in this different world we hear calling us by name, to a different path, a different commitment, a different journey. His voice is heard in so many different ways, but be assured, in these difficult days he is speaking to us, lovingly calling to each of us. He is speaking, we just have to make space to listen. This is resurrection, the second dimension – his lovingly calling our name.

Then in Mary's overwhelming emotion she reaches out to grasp him once again. Sutherland's painting is entitled "Noli me tangere" – do not touch me – Jesus' words to Mary as she reaches out to him.

Do not touch. A phrase we have said or thought over and over again these past weeks and will continue to for weeks to come. Do not touch me, keep your distance. So we can imagine her heart break and the roller coaster of emotion as she discovers him alive but not in the same way – and now she cannot touch him.

She like us today cannot go back to the old ways. He sends her back to her community, his community, to tell them the news. To change them too. And this is the third dimension of resurrection – Christ's risen presence in his followers, called not to be huddled together in fear, but to live lives proclaiming in lives and actions the presence of the risen Christ in the world.

Mary and her companions cannot go back to the old way of being with Jesus. They are transformed into his active agents, his apostles. We are being changed through this experience of being the church outside our buildings. We are discovering what is most important for us to sustain

and strengthen us in faith and love and service. We are discovering Christ's presence among us in ways we had not noticed before.

We are seeing things we need to let go of. We are discovering ways of connecting and sharing the Gospel we had not imagined could work. We are rediscovering our calling to praying and caring, to prayer and service. Here is resurrection, seeing Christ's risen presence in our Christian communities in these challenging times.

Where is resurrection? In our glimpses of a society reordered, in our hearing his voice calling us in our grief and confusion, calling our name with the deepest love, in our Christian communities, our church, discovering his presence among us and his calling afresh. He is with us, he is with the world, he is Risen.

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