

St Edmundsbury Cathedral



Easter Sunday 2024

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Sermon by the Rt Reverend Martin Seeley, Bishop of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich

Easter Vigil and Easter Day 2024

Mark 16: 1-8

At the early morning Easter Vigil service today, the lighting of the Easter fire took, well let's say, a while. No instant conflagration of a fuel-soaked pile of timber. This was a slow burn, and quite a hesitant one at first. It made me think how in my mind I think of the resurrection of Jesus as a sudden, twinkling of an eye moment. Whereas perhaps it was a gradual divine awakening in the dark hours before the rising sun.

Which is where I think our Easter gospel story takes us too. The three women, Mark tells us "fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." That is the end of Mark's Gospel and what an extraordinary way to end. As far as we can tell that really is the ending that Mark intended – you'll find in your bibles a couple of alternative endings, but they were added later, doubtless because people were just uncomfortable with this abrupt and perplexing ending. What does it mean?

The same three women, the two Mary's and Salome, had, been there at the crucifixion, standing we are told by Mark, at a distance, staying with Jesus as he died.

Two of them, the two Marys, then watched Joseph of Arimathea bury Jesus in the tomb he, as a wealthy man, had access to.

And now the three women have returned, very early in the morning, when the sun has just risen. Mark wants to underline this was early, at first light. He is giving us a clue that God is at work, because in the Jewish experience, it is in the morning that God is at work. God has Moses come up Mt Sinai, defends Jerusalem against the king of Assyria, and rescues Daniel from the lions' den, all early in the morning. Mark, telling us that it is early in the morning and when the sun had risen, is wanting us to realise what is going on. God is at work.

And the women find the stone had been rolled away – they had been wondering who would be around to do that for them as they approached the tomb – and a young man is sitting in there – young is important here – youthfulness is about the future, about hope – we are meant to get those associations – and it's another clue. God is at work.

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The young man says, don't be afraid, Jesus is risen, and tell the others and Peter he is going ahead to Galilee where you will see him, just as he told you.

And Jesus had told them. Mark's gospel gives three instances of Jesus telling his disciples that he would suffer, die and rise again. So why had the women come to perform burial rites if he had told them he was going to rise from the dead? It hadn't dawned on them what those words had meant. And now they are fleeing, and say nothing to anyone.

This is a deliberate ending from Mark. So what is he wanting us to understand about Jesus' resurrection?

First, flight. We too flee from the news of the resurrection. We flee, and maybe even in terror, from what we can't handle, what we don't understand and overwhelms us. We run away from what we somewhere inside know is true or might be true, but is too overwhelming to face up to. And we run away from reality when we know it will mean we have got to change. In shock, we flee from the news that our beloved has died, in fear, we run away from hearing the test results, overwhelmed, we run away from climate disaster, appalled and bewildered, we run away from human trauma and devastation in Israel and Gaza.

The three women heard Jesus had risen from the dead and they ran away terrified. And they said nothing to anyone. They ran away from what somewhere inside they knew could be true, but was too overwhelming to face up to. They ran away from the reality of the resurrection because they knew it would change them. We can do the same, fleeing in our minds and in our hearts – not all the time, and less than we used to. It is overwhelming, hard to take in. A slow burn.

And God takes the women by the hand and helps them back to face the news they could not face. This is momentous news, more extraordinary than anything they or we could imagine. So it would take the women a while to absorb it. It took a while to literally dawn on them. It takes a while to dawn on us too, this early morning news, and God takes us by the hand to help us accept the reality of the resurrection.

I know for myself that grasping the meaning of Jesus' resurrection does not happen all at once. It cannot. It is too utterly overwhelming and transformational. That's why the women's fear and silence is so important for us. It's ok. It takes time.

So what about the silence, the women's silence? Sometimes we are silent because we don't think anyone will believe us. That must be part of the women's silence.

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But then, God taking them by the hand, they found ways to speak – of course they did, for the story to continue. And we do too. Maybe we find we can speak about the resurrection because, we reason, without something as dramatic as that that would have been the end of the story and there would be no Christian faith and no church.

Or maybe we can look back at difficult, distressing, challenging times in our lives and see that we were not alone, that somehow the one risen from the dead was there with us, sustaining and loving us through all we were facing.

Or maybe we have known the risen one as the one who has called us into a new direction, a new service, a new commitment, changing our lives.

Or maybe we find we are able to say what Jesus' resurrection means: that we can live in the present because there is nothing left to fear in the future– the future is taken care of. Death is taken care of. Evil is taken care of. Sin is taken care of. Neither evil, nor death, nor sin, has the last word for any of us. That doesn't mean they don't exist. But they don't overwhelm us, or stun us into inaction. God is at work in each of us, bringing us as God did those three women, bringing us to realise what this means and to speak to others about it.

Or maybe we do stay silent for a while, but our lives, our actions, will speak for us, our lives and actions shaped by that unspoken belief in the resurrection. People see our lives turned around into serving others. That we don't put ourselves in the centre. That we can be carried through grief, and support others doing so, that we can face challenges and not be overwhelmed, that we engage in works of love and justice for the sake of those for whom love and justice are far away.

There is a third reason, after our fleeing and our slowing flight, after our silence and breaking our silence, why the end of Mark's Gospel is so important for us. "They were afraid and said nothing to anyone". Yet the Gospel was proclaimed.

Whether we flee, or find ourselves turning and meeting the risen Christ; whether speak or let our actions speak for us; it is not up to us. It is up to God, God who is at work in our lives and the world through the presence of the risen Christ.

The women flee in terror and silence. The story ends. But it doesn't, because God is at work now in and through us, writing the next instalment.

Alleluia, Christ is risen.