

Easter Sunday

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Introduction

This is the first day of the week, after a tortuous end to the week before, and in the readings for this Sunday we hear of the first witnesses to the resurrection. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary are travelling at night towards dawn. They are following the customary practice of the bereaved worldwide – to visit the grave, to be near the body of the beloved, to bear witness to grief.

It is in this most ordinary and human of practices that the joy is revealed to them.

This narrative of resurrection is a complicated one; being the joy at the heart of the Christian faith, it nonetheless feels so distant from the everyday experiences of bereavement suffered by so many, whether through natural or violent circumstances.

Text

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.’ This is my message for you.” So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!” And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”

Comment

This narrative from the end of Matthew’s gospel contains in it so many important words from across this gospel’s text. The clothing worn by Jesus brings to mind the descriptions of clothing worn elsewhere in the gospel: from John’s distinctive dress (3:4) to Jesus’ instructions not to worry about clothing (6:25); from false prophets dressed to impress (7:15) to the garment of light in the transfiguration (17:12). Now, Jesus is like lightning, his clothing white as snow.

In the light of this life, the other men – the guards— seem like dead men.

Additionally, the angel's instructions to the women to initially "come" echoes the instructions to "follow me" throughout Matthew's gospel (the Greek is the same for these instructions — 4:19, 11:28). Building on the invitation to come is the invitation to "go" and proclaim the word, a prefiguration of Jesus' instructions to his followers at the end of the gospel text to "Go and make disciples of all..."

The women are invited to inspect the place where Jesus had been laid. One calls to mind the deserted places sought out by Jesus for prayer (14:13) and the awful place of the skull where his life was so brutally ended. The women, faithful in their demonstration of respect for their dead are now being asked to face their pain, and discover a deeper joy.

This joy has been an underlying theme throughout the whole of Matthew's gospel. The Magi are overwhelmed with joy (2:10), the seed that hears the word responds with joy (13:20), the one who discovers the treasure in the field does so with joy (13:44) and now the women — Mary Magdalene and the other Mary — leave the tomb with fear and great joy.

What are we to do with this text that ties fear and joy together, bringing us to places of pain in order to discover a new narrative, pointing towards difficulty as the place of discipleship and instructing us to be clothed with garments of integrity and light in the face of opposition?

For us the story of resurrection is far from the everyday. We make cups of tea, we seek to find ways of being faithful while atrocious things happen around us, we watch the news, we watch a television programme, we give to charity, we pray for the end to wars, we watch and hope and wonder what Easter means to those caught in an endless cycle of Good Fridays.

This is a tension into which Christians are called. No wonder the gospel of Mark ends with the disciples hearing of the resurrection and responding in fear. Some respond to pain with protest, some with prayer, some with action, some with policy, some with art.

On this day of joy, we are not far from days of pain. The story of joy is not one that denies the realities of life in a conflicted world. In all, we are called to the faithful practice — like the two women named Mary — of bearing witness.

Response

A response for Easter? So many of us have so many traditions already, from Dawn services to family meals to chocolate and prayer. Perhaps this day it is worthwhile paying attention to the things of life and death, so intimately wrapped up in the story of Jesus, so embodied in the grief and joy, both, of the women of the resurrection.

Prayer

Jesus of death and life,

We come to you on this day of life
knowing that you, too,
have walked through days of the dead.
Help us hold onto death and life
rejoicing with joy and mourning with grief
Turning with faithful friendship
like your friends turned to you.
Amen.

