

Seeing Jesus again

The women (Mary Magdalene and Mary the wife of Zebedee) had been Jesus' disciples – they weren't numbered in the Twelve, of course, they were women after all. And they'd been with Jesus throughout his ministry. They'd seen so many remarkable things.

They'd seen him make the blind see and the lame walk,

They'd seen him cure disease and cast out demons,

They'd seen him feed the multitudes from a few loaves and fishes.

They'd even seen him raise the dead.

They'd seen him perform miracles. Miracles beyond their imagination.

But they'd also seen how things had changed. They'd seen how the crowds had cheered Jesus as he approached Jerusalem, and then seen the people steadily turn away from.

They'd heard the cries of 'Hosanna' of Palm Sunday turn to cries of 'Crucify him' by Friday.

They'd seen Jesus beaten, they'd seen the crown of thorns placed on his head, they'd seen him carry the cross to Golgotha.

And there they'd seen Jesus nailed to the cross, and raised up.

But it was all over on that Friday afternoon.

Those women had watched Jesus die. There were no miracles to save him. Hanging on a cross, nails in hands and feet, gasping for air, they had heard him call out with the last bit of energy he could muster, "It is finished." And he was dead.

They'd seen so many remarkable things, but now it had all come to an end. They wondered how it happened, after all, they'd seen Jesus do the impossible.

But now they'd seen Jesus' body taken down from the cross, and they'd watched his body wrapped in the shroud and placed in the tomb - tomb cut out of solid rock. They would have watched as a huge stone was rolled across the entrance of the tomb, sealing the dead Jesus in his grave forever - or so they thought.

They went home. The next day was the Sabbath.

It was a long night and a long day. What they did is not recorded. Perhaps they went to the synagogue. Perhaps they stayed home in hiding, in case those that had turned on Jesus turned on his followers next. If they ventured to the synagogue, to listen to the familiar scriptures and prayers – but it would have been a painful reminder of the loss of their rabbi, Jesus - the teacher who could interpret the scriptures like no one else. The one who had claimed that he would fulfil those very scriptures.

Then it was another long night.

Matthew tells us that the women got up early and went to look at the tomb of Jesus. Perhaps to pray, perhaps to grieve, perhaps to just sit quietly and remember Jesus.

And then, something happened. Something unimaginable. Matthew's gospel details things which aren't recorded in the other gospels.

“There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.” (Matthew 28:2-4).

There was an earthquake, not just a tremor or gentle rumble, but a violent earthquake. Sure enough, Jesus’ resurrection would shake up people’s understanding of who he was, and indeed rock the whole world.

But think about what it would have been like Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, who had witnessed Jesus’ death and witnessed his entombment. Death was final, after all... but now, early on that first Easter morning, they saw the angel, dazzling in white, roll the stone away and sit on it.

The guards who had been stationed at the tomb by Pilate fell to the ground like dead men.

And then the angel spoke “Do not be afraid” (which seems to be a standard angelic greeting). “...I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay.” (28:5-6)

I think it’s remarkable that the stone wasn’t rolled away by the angel in order to let Jesus out - Jesus had already risen. It was rolled away just so that the two Marys could look inside and see for themselves that the tomb was empty.

I love the detail of the angel sitting on the rock – he’s done his job, and now he’s having a rest, but even then, he reassured the two Marys.

Then, still sitting on the rock, the angel tells the women what to do next - Then go quickly and tell his disciples: ‘He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.’ Now I have told you.” (28:7)

Matthew, doesn’t tell us if the women went inside the tomb or if they simply looked in – but they were convinced. And while they were afraid – or perhaps in awe at the power of God – they ran, they ran filled with joy to tell the disciples. The impossible had happened. Jesus who had died, had risen!

We can look back at Good Friday and know what Jesus had accomplished – what he’d finished – that the price of sin had been paid, Jesus taking the sins of the world on his shoulders as he’d spread out his arms in love for us – for all people – on that cross. But it wasn’t until Sunday morning, that we could know for sure.

Jesus’ resurrection not only confirmed the sacrifice of Good Friday was sufficient, but confirmed all those claims he had made were true.

Easter – the day when those two women saw Jesus again - shows us that there is life beyond the grave. Death is no longer final – remember those words from Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 (vs 55) “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?”

Jesus’ return from the grave allows us to face death with new confidence. And to face life with new confidence too.

Jesus is risen. If he had not returned on that first Easter Sunday, his death would not be any different to that of any other human death. But his death was for us – for our sins - and his resurrection shows that the debt for past sins has been paid. When he was at Cornelius’ house,

Peter explained that, “All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in [Jesus] receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (Acts 10:43).

Paul tells us in his letter to the Romans “...that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.” (Romans 6:4).

We may have a new life! A new life through Jesus. A new life, a good life, a life closer to God, a life closer to each other. A life which is meaningful and hopeful.

Our old lives can hang over us. We’ve all done bad stuff. We’ve hurt other people – whether we’ve meant to or not. We’ve neglected others. Sometimes unintentionally, sometimes not.

Many people will helpfully point out our various failings to us. But so often, we realise our own shortcomings. We feel guilty. We feel embarrassed. We feel shame. And we realise that we are just not good enough.

But as we come to see Jesus again, to turn to him and to know him – we can realise that that God has dealt with all our past wrongdoing. On Maundy Thursday, we sang the song ‘Gethsemane’ which included a description of those wrongdoings – “No sin too slight to overlook, no crime too great to carry”.

No matter how small, or how large, all our sins which cause us to fall short of God’s glory. But also, no matter how small, or how large, all our sins are forgiven through Jesus’ sacrifice.

Sure, our past may embarrass us. People may judge us and think badly about us because of what has happened in the past but ... ultimately, God has dealt with that past. He has erased it with the blood of Christ. We are forgiven. And we know it is true because of Jesus’ resurrection.

We won’t be perfect. Our lives won’t be perfect. But they will be moving in the right direction.

And even though we can be confident in Jesus, in his sacrifice, and in the hope that he gives all who turn to him in faith, things will still hurt us.

We will lose people we love.

Relationships will fail.

We will become ill and frail.

We will see people we love suffering.

And of course, beyond our immediate surrounds, we see so much wrong with the world.

But in Jesus’ life and ministry we saw glimpses of the kingdom of heaven breaking through to the world. The healing of disease and blindness. The feeding of the hungry. The casting out of evil influence. Even the raising of the dead.

But in his resurrection, we see the kingdom of God working outward.

Jesus, the son of God, our saviour was dead but is alive – not just alive two thousand odd years ago, but alive today – remember that at the end of his gospel, Matthew (28:20) tells us that Jesus promised “surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

The women went to the tomb of Jesus on Easter morning, sad, confused and grieving. After encountering the angel with the news of Jesus’ resurrection, and seeing the empty tomb, they ran back to the disciples excited and joyful. Easter had changed them.

But even as they were rushing to the disciples, Matthew tells us that “Suddenly Jesus met them. “Greetings,” he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. (28:9)

They saw Jesus again. And they worshiped him. No observant Jewish person would ever worship anything or anyone other than God! After all, the first of the Ten Commandments emphatically states “I am the Lord your God. You shall have no other gods besides me. -- You shall not bow down or worship them. I am an envious God.”

But the Marys worshipped the risen Jesus. They had believed that he was the Messiah, and destined for the throne of David but now these women recognized Jesus as God. And they reacted in the only appropriate way—in worship.

Worship is more than coming to church. More than singing and praying and telling God how great he is. Worship is the recognition of Jesus as God, the Son – not just a man of God. And the proper response in worship is to humble ourselves before him – metaphorically bow down to him – and offering him ourselves.

Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.” (28:10)

With the news of Jesus’ resurrection, the fears of the disciples were dispelled, they became people of boldness who would be witnesses of the good news.

Just like the angel had sent the women to share the news of Jesus’ resurrection, so too does Jesus himself “Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me”.

And since that time, the message of the resurrected Jesus has been proclaimed. By those women. By those disciples who were in hiding on that first Easter morning. And it has been proclaimed over the years by countless people to the ends of the earth. It remains good news today. Good news for us. Good news for us to take into our hearts. Good news to share with others.

It was in the power of the risen Jesus that the early Christians went out to share the gospel and change the world - and we are called to do the same today.

So, on this Easter Sunday, on the anniversary of the women seeing Jesus again, let us all see Jesus again. Put your faith, put your trust in Jesus, the risen Lord and Saviour.

Amen.