

## John 20: 1-18 Easter Day Tidenham 2024

### Prayer

Introduction – perception and then belief is a funny old thing, isn't it? How each individual sees, learns, digests what is presented to them. Ask an insurer – when they read the various accounts of a motor accident for instance. Even with honest intent each recollection is different even contrary. I remember once revisiting the scene where a motor cyclist had driven in the middle of the road straight into the front of my car....and it looked a bit different to the way I had remembered it!

It is the same when we are confronted with the Gospel, with the stories recounted in Scripture. The characters at the time remember different things. The various writers are convinced by different facets of the diamond of truth. And we who hear the accounts are moved by different aspects. We learn differently, process differently and God in His wonderful Grace knows what we need and when we are ready to hear the truth in all His fullness – when we are ready to truly *believe*.

In our reading from acts we have a synopsis of the *facts* of Jesus life and death from Paul and it finishes with the verse: 'All the prophets (the people he is addressing at the time, steeped in these Scriptures should know) testify about him, that everyone who *believes* in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.' In that forgiveness we find a new relationship – being made holy and able to walk with Holy God. In that lovely hymn to God be the Glory: 'the vilest offender who truly believes, that moment from Jesus a pardon receives...'

In common speech today *believe* is reduced to one of two things: either a sort of hope or speculation – 'I believe I can get there by noon.' Or an intellectual assent of facts. I believe that a rainbow occurs when rain is combined with sunlight. But the biblical definition of the word that we translate 'believe' is a bit more than those. It is to be truly convinced of something – or someone. *And* to personally appropriate that something or that *someone* as true. To trust and to be willing to testify to that truth: to say it, to act it, to live it. In fact, to be utterly transformed by it. It is most definitely more than simply head knowledge. The truth of the risen Christ and our acceptance of the one who is 'the way, the truth and the life' *will show*. All of the signs that John speaks of in his Gospel account are vital points of telling the story – and we believers are to become a sign like that, the way we are changed and the way we are.

But I'm sure all of us recognise there is a progressive discovery and realisation of the meaning, of the Christ event. Remember Jesus healing the blind man and asking him what he could see? The blind man responded 'I see people as trees' a bit blurry, unclear. So, Jesus touches him again and all is sharp and focussed. Our learning is like that. We have different levels of ability, we learn differently so education is repetition, teaching in various methods – till the pennies drop and we get it.

So it was with the disciples, they *knew* Jesus and they heard Jesus teach, saw his healings and miracles but still they were on a journey and didn't fully get it. Till they experienced the transformed risen Lord for themselves.

Mary goes to the tomb first and thinks – 'grave robbers!' and runs back to pass on the information – the body has gone. Simon Peter and the beloved disciple run to see and have a closer look – the beloved 'believed' (?) 'for as yet (the account reads) they did not understand the scripture that he must rise from the dead.' So, *what* did they believe?

Well, they did not believe Mary's 'grave robbers' were the culprits – which grave robber would tidily fold the head cloth separate from the other wrappings...but they certainly believed the body was gone. It must have been horrendous, the death of their friend and now the loss of the body. Those that have lost loved ones where the body has not been found can never find closure. Perhaps they believed that Jesus HAD in some fashion gone to the Father as Jesus had told them before, and not been held back by death.

Moving on to Mary's encounter with Jesus. At first, she doesn't even recognise Him. She challenges this figure to help find the body. Poor lass probably in grief-stricken shock, traumatized and weepy – hardly able to see clearly

Interesting that Jesus says to her 'whom are you looking for?' An echo of right at the beginning as he is calling his inner circle – '*What* are you looking for?' A question we might ask ourselves or those we share our lives with, what or who are thy looking for. What is it we want? Or need? Is it meaning, significance, purpose, truth? Or perhaps it is eternal life? In which case it *is* WHO are we looking for? Who can offer us all of this?

Paul says to the Corinthians 'if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain, and your faith has been in vain.' (I Cor 15:14) No resurrection, no defeat of death – no hope.

Jesus calls out her name. And as he had said the sheep recognise the voice of the Shepherd – he may have been different in some way but indeed it was Jesus. It was her time, she heard, she turned and she saw him. Yet Jesus said ‘Do not hold on to me for I have not yet ascended to the Father’, don’t cling to me but go out there and do what you have been called to do, my beloved there is a step further to go. The disciples are to be blessed by yet further revelation. The *teacher* that Mary recognises has more to impart and she has to act.

And then Mary becomes, in her enthusiasm after this encounter – the first evangelist. Mary, whose testimony as a woman in that culture would not have carried weight, is instructed by the risen Jesus: ‘Go to my brothers and say and to them, I am ascending to my father and your father, to my God and your God.’ Go to my family and your family and tell them OUR father... believe and act, there is to be more.

Mary obediently went and announced to the disciples. ‘I have seen the Lord.’ That moment that Mary in Jesus truly believed. It showed, and she, transformed, trusted, and acted on what she said she believed.

Justin Brierley a broadcaster and author wrote very recently in an article entitled ‘a Christian Revival is under way in Britain’:

‘As a Christian I believe things that are dead can come back to life. That’s the point of the story after all. As G.K. Chesterton wrote: ‘Christianity has died many times and risen again; for it had a God who knew the way out of the grave.’

The tomb was empty.

Christ is risen – Alleluia

Amen