

## St James' Church, Weybridge

**Easter Day, 31<sup>st</sup> March 2024**

### **First Reading** Acts 10:34-43

Peter addresses the Gentile Cornelius, his family, and friends, acknowledging that God shows no partiality when dealing with the nations of the world. He then tells them of the life, death and resurrection of Christ, whose Gospel has spread throughout Judea.

### **Gospel** John 20:1-18

Having summoned Peter and the other disciple to the open tomb, Mary Magdalene remains at the tomb, weeping, when the disciples return home. Jesus appears to her, and she mistakes him for the gardener, but he calls her by name, and she recognises him. Jesus tells her to return to the disciples with a clear message of his resurrection.

### **HOMILY**

*"She... saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus... Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him..."* (John 20:14-15)

Alleluia, the Lord is risen, he is risen indeed, alleluia!

Two very naughty boys were sent to see the Vicar. Their parents were at their wits end and thought the old priest could put the fear of God into them. The priest sat the older child outside his study and asked the younger one in first to account for himself with a very simple question of faith. "Young man" he asked, "Where is Jesus?" The boy looked puzzled.

The priest asked again even more firmly. "Where is Jesus?" Still no reply from the somewhat frightened child. The priest shouted, "Where is Jesus?" With that the boy bolted out of the door, grabbing his older brother as he flew past and they ran down the road. The older brother stopped his sibling and asked, "What did the priest say to you, to make you run away like that?" His brother replied, "Quickly we must go – Jesus is missing, and they think we did that as well!"

Our Holy Week journey 2024 has reached the joy of the resurrection, and the hope of the centuries is fulfilled – Jesus is alive. God has accomplished something new and wonderful in creation, the creator has been busy re-creating and bringing about life in all its fullness. It is so wonderful that the word Alleluia is sung as a new dawn is first experienced in a garden with an early morning visit to the tomb where Mary Magdalene finds the stone rolled to the side, but where is the body? Jesus is missing! She runs back to tell Peter and the other disciple, John, *"the one whom Jesus loved"* (John 13:23).

She explains what she has found – or not – but where is Jesus? This must have been devastating for them all, first to have witnessed the death of the most wonderful person they could ever know, and then to find his body is missing from the grave where they left him just a couple of days before. Peter and John make haste to the garden and find the tomb just as Mary has described it.

They enter and find nothing but the discarded linen wrappings – where is the Lord, they ask, perhaps with some of Jesus' words running through their minds, that after three days the Son of man would be raised. Could it be true? They then return to the other disciples, no doubt dumbfounded that such a large boulder could have been moved and Jesus taken. Mary remains in the garden, outside the tomb, weeping. Now she has lost his physical body too.

Then something extraordinary happens as two angels in white appear to Mary as a sort of advance guard to the appearance of Jesus himself: preparing the ground, so to speak. They offer no explanation about what has happened, and their function here seems to be to ask just one vital question: “Woman, why are you weeping?”

Lost in her grief, Mary doesn’t appear to be startled by the appearance of the angels but answers their question in the only way she can: “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” Immediately the angels are forgotten as Jesus appears behind her, although she does not know that it is him. Jesus repeats the angels’ question before focusing Mary’s attention even more closely: “For whom are you looking?”

Mary answers this stranger, expecting him to be the gardener. Although she comes face to face with the Lord, she completely fails to recognise him because her tears and her emotions, her great sense of loss obscure her view. It is only when our Lord uses her name, ‘Mary’ that she realises the impossible made real – Jesus is risen, Alleluia!

Most of us will know the reality of bereavement and loss in our own lives, those early days when everything is a haze, and we struggle through, perhaps unable to see a way ahead. When the one we love is missing. And this inability to recognise what God is about is not unusual in the scriptures. In the Gospel accounts of the disciples’ early meetings with the resurrected Christ we see this again and again, for example in John 21, Jesus appears to the disciples on the beach just after daybreak, but the disciples do not know that it is him.

Similarly, in Luke 24, when Jesus accompanies two unnamed disciples on the road to Emmaus, it is only when Jesus breaks the bread while at table that they recognise their travelling companion is the Lord of all time and eternity – before he vanishes from their sight. These glimpses of God speak of real faith, and they are wonderful and transformative.

So, on that first Easter morning, when Peter and John run to the tomb and find it empty, they don’t hang around – they lack patience – they go back to the house, pondering what it could all mean. Perhaps if they had stayed, like Mary Magdalene and remained at the tomb they would have seen the risen Lord. By staying there with her anguish, confusion, and fears, rather than running away, Mary was shown a reality beyond her wildest imaginings. Jesus is alive! “My Lord, and my God.” She says with joy.

How often do we fall into that trap, of being caught up in our feelings and emotions and perhaps at times missing what God is doing right in front of us! Perhaps we are running from something – from faith – from ourselves?

Our Anglican Christian faith teaches us that Christ is everywhere, yet there are very special and holy places where God chooses to dwell too – one of those places being this beautiful Church at the heart of Weybridge Town Centre.

Today, we rejoice that Jesus is risen, and sing Alleluia! We pray that in our times of challenge we will recognise what God is about in our lives; having the patience to wait on the Lord, with open eyes and willing hearts, to let God in and transform us into his disciples.

Mary Magdalene was the first to see the risen Lord, yes God chose a woman to share the good news of the resurrection, in a man’s world. Today as an inclusive church we recognise that God longs to be at the centre of our lives whoever we are, whatever our failings. Mary’s encounter with the risen Lord was counter-cultural and utterly transformative, just as Jesus continues to be today.

By centring our lives on the risen Christ, we too may experience such a revelation of faith, and renewal of hope in our time and place. There is nothing to run from – at St James' you have come home. Alleluia, the Lord is risen, he is risen indeed, alleluia!

*Father Damian Harrison-Miles, March 2024.*