

## Luke 24.1-12

20<sup>th</sup> April 2025 Easter Day

Isaiah 25.6-9

# Faith at Dawn

I wonder how many times the word Hallelujah will be sung around the world today. Meaning *Praise the Lord*; it usually dominates Christian worship on Easter Sunday. As a young minister I counted how many times we had sung it one Easter, and in those days, we had morning and evening service, plus a youth group afterwards. Well, just in church we had sung it 62 times in the hymns, excluding however many times it occurred in the choir's two anthems.

As Easter Morning People every Sunday is, in its own way, a celebration of the Resurrection.

We commenced the liturgical journey that brought us to this point on Ash Wednesday as we lingered with Jesus in the Wilderness, we've walked with him from Galilee to Jerusalem and listened to his teaching and looked on as he stretched out a hand of compassion to those he met in village after village. Last Sunday we felt the excitement build as he made a final entry into Jerusalem greeted by the waving of palm branches. And then, there has been Holy Week. A bleak narrative of struggle, conflict, oppression and injustice. And yet these last seven days have once again offered us symbols and metaphors that have sustained faith for generations: a bowl and towel, bread and wine and, of course, a cross upon which forgiveness was shown.

And now, comes a Day of Rejoicing. The light after darkness, love after hate, hope after despair and our hearts are glad and once again, we reach for the Hallelujahs.

Yet maybe we should not pick them up quite so soon this morning. For Luke begins today's narrative with a certain restraint because, initially at least, all is not well at the garden tomb.

The day starts in confusion for Mary Magdalene, Joanna, James' mother Mary and the other unnamed women who, as a group of mourners, had visited the tomb with spices only to find the stone rolled away and the body gone. Luke puts it like this: *they stood there utterly at a loss*. We feel their relentless exhaustion, and, at first light, it must have seemed as if the nightmare of Holy Week was set to continue.

The body of Jesus, his dead body, had become an issue in the unfolding events at Calvary. Dying mid-afternoon on the Friday meant there was not enough time to dig a trench and bury him before sundown and the beginning of Sabbath. Trench burial would have been usual for someone of Jesus' social standing. So, instead he was lent a tomb by Josphe of Arimathea. The rich would have the body laid on a tomb shelf, and then later the bones would have been gathered and placed into a chest. Yet now there was no body. In a week in which everything seemed to have gone wrong here was just one more incident to add to that awful litany.

At this low moment two angels appear, writes Luke. The women, in their grief, meet them with eyes downcast feeling terrified.

Whatever way you read it, Easter Sunday morning doesn't start well and there is a definite lack of Hallelujahs in the air. As one commentator I read put it: *Emptiness (the lack of a body) makes space in the story for their distress*.

I much appreciate the short conversations we have at the door as we greet each other Sunday by Sunday and a few months ago one of you shared with me the sense that there often seems to be so little hope in the world at the moment, and I totally get that. Someone else told me how much they try to stop themselves tuning into the news these days.

Well, the gospels are brutally honest at times. For these early morning visitors to the tomb this still felt like the worst of times with hope in short supply because the news had, thus far, been so bad. The context of the

day was confusion and fear – emotions that might, indeed, feel familiar to us even today.

So it's now, at probably their lowest ebb, that the story shifts gear and changes direction. The angels, or two men in dazzling garments as they are described, bring words of gentle rebuke: *Why search among the dead for one who is alive?* It's a line to lift the shadows of the night and usher in the healing warmth of the dawn sunshine. It's a line that moves us from death to life. *Why search among the dead for one who is alive?*

Now all the gospels make this transition in the story in different ways. Put the accounts side by side and there are discrepancies of narrative with no one authoritative account. Was it one angel or two? Did Mary Magdalene arrive by herself or with a group?

To look forensically at these passages is to misunderstand their intention. The truth of the Resurrection isn't to be found in an order of events but in its fundamental message that God did not abandon Jesus, and that life and hope can follow death and despair. Desmond Tutu's Easter Creed is surely worth repeating every year that: *Goodness is stronger than evil; Love is stronger than hate; Light is stronger than darkness; and Life is stronger than death.* Now those are lines after which I want to put the word, *Hallelujah!*

So the message of the angels, as they reminded the women of Jesus' teaching in Galilee, is that they are not to be afraid for this was the third day, a day of life. And that was the message they relayed to the eleven.

This central story of Christianity is profound. It's the Easter message and we value it so much because of the hope it brings and the life it infuses. Its message cannot be locked into words and so, for centuries we have sought out symbols and metaphors. We sing of green blades rising from the buried grain, we search for eggs, or we place a circle around the cross as a way of blending something of Good Friday with Easter Sunday. Faith is like that and is often expressed, especially on a day such as this, better in poetry than in prose.

To have *faith at dawn* is a challenge for all of us and comes in many ways. It's about facing that moment when it would be so easy to give up and give in, and choose instead, to go on.

Perhaps, like me, you can recall long road trips, maybe family holidays to Scotland or Cornwall, and piling into the car at 4 or 5 am when it was still inky black. No one wanted to get out of their bed, no one really wanted to get into a cold car. That first couple of hours was more about coping with what we were leaving behind, the darkness and stress of starting the journey, than it would become, of greeting the dawn, the sunshine and the prospect of holiday.

As these women stood in an empty tomb at dawn it was the past that probably flooded their minds. The trauma of a brutal death, the disappointment of dashed hopes weighing heavy in the air.

At such moments no one might blame you for giving up. Yet the angels pointed them towards a new day and urged them to hold on to faith, to believe in love and to find again the hope and strength of Jesus' teaching and example that would enliven them and enable them to greet a new day, an Easter Day.

I remember coming upon the picture on your orders of service of St Mary's Church, Southampton, during Covid. I love this picture, and it still speaks to me, five years on from when I first saw it, of Easter hope.

The Southampton football team, known as The Saints, started life in the youth group at St Mary's and today it's a thriving city centre church, now rebuilt and pristine. Yet, look at the photo from World War Two when Southampton took many hits. It shows a defiant congregation gathering in the shell of their church, open to the elements, yet there they are, their *Faith at Dawn* moment. Was this the time to give up, no! Was this the time to abandon their belief in love, no! Was this the time to just lament the past and present rather than face the future with renewed hope, no! I think this was the time, even with trembling hands and fearful hearts, to dig deep and reach for a Hallelujah or two.

The message of Easter is: this isn't so much the end of something bad, but rather the beginning of something good.

Maybe it's understandable to view this Festival Day as a climax or conclusion to a long Lent. And, of course, there is much truth in such a way of thinking. Yet it has struck me, perhaps as never before this year, that today is not so much the end of the Lent journey but the start of the Easter one. Indeed, in the calendar of The Church, the Easter season which starts today lasts fifty days. A time for us to meet Jesus by the lake, spending time with his disciples, reinstating Peter, explaining all that has gone on so that they, his friends, might continue to serve the world with his love and share his light.

We will spend the rest of our lives seeking to live out the Easter message with many *faith at dawn* moments. Times, perhaps, when although tempted to give up we too hear the words of the garden angels saying to us *Why search among the dead for the living*. And in their message, we hear God's call for us to embrace life, love and hope. To leave church this morning and greet the future, grateful that we do so walking in the light of resurrection hope.

So, will you join me in the Easter Acclamation on your orders of service:

God of love, you have raised Jesus from death to life!

**Lead us always into newness of life.**

Light of Christ, rising in glory,

**be the light of our hearts!**

Spirit of Resurrection, grant us your hope and joy

and give us *faith at dawn*.

**Alleluia! Alleluia!**

**Thanks be to God. Amen**

*Ian Green, Amersham, 19<sup>th</sup> April 2025*