

A very happy, joyful, hopeful and full of life Easter to all here this morning!

Empty - there's been a lot of emptiness around in the last year and it's not something to be happy about...empty pubs & empty diaries for some....empty purses & empty food cupboards for others, empty sports clubs for many and for all of us, chairs empty without our families and friends..

Not so with Easter - we're celebrating something that was empty - the tomb! We use a big word *Resurrection* to describe what happened to Jesus - it means Jesus isn't dead anymore! / Jesus is alive again! It's what our Christian faith is all about.

On Good Friday Jesus died a cruel, agonising death on the cross and was hastily yet lovingly buried in a borrowed tomb. First light on the Sunday saw the great stone rolled away: the tomb was empty. The awesome power of God had given new life to Jesus and that same life is ours when we turn to Jesus for forgiveness.

But of course, we're looking back in hindsight, and all this was far from clear to the ones who discovered the empty tomb. I wonder what expressions and emotions might have been on their faces on the morning called Easter?

Two groups of people - first a group of women and then a pair of men - made their way to the tomb. The women went prepared to rub spices and perfumes on Jesus' body. They were expecting to feel fresh grief from the loss of their friend and teacher.

And then they arrived at the tomb and found the stone rolled away.

Take a look at this painting called *The Three Marys*, from 1910 by Henry Ossawa Tanner...
What do their faces say?



The pair of men hurried to the tomb after hearing about what the women had found. They had to go to see for themselves whether the story told by the women could possibly be true.

Here is a painting called *The Disciples Peter and John Hurry to the Tomb on the Morning of the Resurrection*, from 1898 by Eugene Burnand...

What do their faces say?



And what will our faces say on Easter morning or on any morning that you wake up realizing that Christ has risen and is alive?

Mary Magdalene is the Mary who is centre stage in John's vivid account of the resurrection. There is gripping suspense; there are powerful emotions.

In the dark, Mary finds the stone rolled away and runs in fear and horror to fetch Peter and John. Inside the tomb, they find no evidence of grave robbers - the burial cloths are neatly folded.

John, the unnamed one, 'believes' perhaps that is 'now believes Mary's story?'

Something extraordinary has happened, yes, but they can't make sense of it all.

They go back home.

Mary stays at the tomb weeping in grief.

Now she takes a look inside for herself - no fear it seems of two angels in white.

But theirs is a compassionate, 'Woman, why are you crying?'

'I can't find the body of my Lord', replies Mary and she turns around.

And there is Jesus in her sight, repeating the question of the angels and also, 'Who are you looking for?'

Mary's eyes see just an ordinary person, a gardener. She pleads desperately with him.

'Mary!' Jesus speaks her name. Then and only then does Mary recognise Jesus.

Bit by bit, we watch Mary move to the point at which she understands who Jesus is, until she finally calls out 'Rabboni' - her own way of calling Jesus her Lord.

When Mary first went looking for Jesus, she saw only the outside of the tomb and the stone rolled away; she assumed that his body had been stolen. Peter and John had no other explanations.

The second time, Mary looked inside the tomb and was met with love for her in her state of sorrow. She was still focussing on finding Jesus's body, but she turned around to look in a different direction.

The third time, Mary was looking directly at Jesus, yet still didn't recognise him - in her mind she was searching for Jesus' dead body. Then Jesus called Mary by her name and somehow it broke through her tunnel vision, her misconceptions and misunderstandings.

I think that Mary's experiences of coming to recognise the living Lord Jesus often echoes through our own stories of finding faith.

Taking a first step of investigation, then running away in fear...

others around not sure of what they believe...

being drawn closer by the love we're shown by other Christians...

turning in a new direction to find help answering our questions...

our set ways of thinking stopping us seeing Jesus for who he really is...

then finally something happening that gives us an overwhelming awareness of God's presence and love in Jesus.

Welsh poet and priest R.S.Thomas puts it like this in his poem 'Suddenly'

I looked at him, not with the eye only

but with the whole of my being,

overflowing with him as a chalice

would with the sea.

Jesus is standing, there, waiting to be noticed: in our lives, in our churches, in our world.

Will we notice him today?

I believe that this progressive dawning of new understanding continues throughout our journey with God. As we live and love in the life of a church, walk alongside our neighbours in the ups and downs of their lives, listen to other people's experiences and ideas, read the Bible and pray and worship, then we should expect the risen Jesus to continually challenge and disturb our understanding of God, the world and ourselves.

The first disciples found the resurrection perplexing and disturbing, and it turned their lives upside down....

But then Jesus had spent all his life turning things upside down, because that is the nature of God's kingdom...

Love your enemies, do good to them

Lend without expecting anything back

Live with the weeds, they will be sorted at the end of the growing season

Greatest upturning of Easter - death and the evil one defeated

I invite you to find a STONE from somewhere outside - I have one from my drive.

Put it in a pocket, in your purse or handbag to remember...the stone that was moved from the tomb

Whenever your hand feels it, turn it round and upside down..and ask what Jesus wants to turn around or turn upside down in your life and the life around you.

Lesley Brown