

Easter Sunday – 24 April 2011 – 10 am

Matthew 28:1-11

It's hard to remember now what Saturday was like.

A black hole.

A nightmare that you long to wake up from.

An impossibility – how could this have happened, how could this be true –

and yet the exhaustion of body and mind and spirit was so very very real.

Physically shattered, aching and numb at the same time, exhausted but beyond sleeping, a paralysis of limbs, a paralysis of mind; emotionally drained, emptied, wrung out.

Saturday was a long long nothingness full of pain and emptiness.

As dawn broke the following day, Mary and I were going to the tomb, back to the tomb.

We'd sat there, opposite the tomb, watching as Joseph of Arimathea had wrapped his body in a clean linen cloth, laid it in his own new tomb, and then rolled the stone over the entrance.

Joseph had gone away, and we had stayed sitting there, just sitting.

And then the guards had turned up, the regular beat of a military march, armour clanking, fully armed, barked orders – so much noise, so much force – and for what? To put a seal on the tombstone, for goodness sake and then to stand guard there.

That was the chief priests and Pilate, in cahoots –

“we remember this imposter said ”Three days and I'll rise again”, and we don't want his disciples trying to trick the people into thinking he's alive again – now that we've got him where we want him, dead and gone, we want to make sure he stays that way.”

As if any of us, would have been capable that Saturday of the thinking, the energy, the hope required to come up with a stunt like that. That Saturday – not one of us could have strung enough thoughts together to organise our way out of a paper bag, let alone a body snatching. Still, in their fear, in their paranoia, they sealed the tomb and posted a guard.

Anyway, Passover Sabbath was over, and as dawn was breaking we headed back to the tomb.

What were we thinking? Just to be near him, I guess, as near as we could get to where his body lay, that poor broken body, shrouded now, and at peace behind the tombstone.

Strange that the chief priests had heard those words about “three days and I'll rise again”. And believed them, or half believed them, enough to make sure that they weren't going to be true.

We had heard them, of course – Jesus had talked at different times about why he was going to Jerusalem, what was going to happen there. Great suffering, handed over to the chief priests and scribes, mocking, flogging, crucifixion....

We heard but didn't hear the final words. Always he finished with “And on the third day he will be raised”. But by then we were past listening, or we were trying to work out how Jesus could not mean what he was saying so plainly – there had to be another way of understanding it: if we had ears to hear, surely there was something else we could hear here. He couldn't mean ‘killed’!

So did we remember those final words “and he will be raised” as we headed for the tomb on the third day? I'd like to be able to say yes, but, no, not really, we were lost, beyond hope, beyond faith, beyond remembering.

And then what happened? Well, I can't tell you. We didn't see Jesus rise from the dead.

I felt the earthquake, the ground shaking beneath our feet, just as it had on Friday afternoon when Jesus had breathed his last. On Friday it felt as if the earth was shaking with grief even as we were racked with sobs, collapsing under the weight of our grief and our despair and our pain. It was as if the earth itself, the whole of creation, shared our sorrow.

This time – well – when we picked ourselves up we saw the angel, bright as bright and white as snow,

like a pillar of lightning or fire, dazzling, sitting on the stone which he had rolled away.  
How did I know it was an angel? Believe me, if you see one, you just know. What else could it be?  
There is such light concentrated in its being and such authority. Holiness, power, awefulness.  
Occasionally Peter or Andrew or John had spoken, cryptically, of the experience they'd had on the mountain, when they saw Jesus changed, transfigured. They always talked about the light, the brightness, that seemed to pour from Jesus – and it was something like that with the angel. We were dazzled, overwhelmed, awestruck, terrified.

Do not be afraid, he said. I know you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; he has been raised, as he said.

He has been raised, as he said.

We remembered then. The tapes replayed in our minds – Jerusalem, suffering, handed over, killed, and on the third day he will be raised.

He has been raised.

When did we believe? Was it when we saw inside the tomb, saw the place where the body had lain, now empty? No, I think it was when the angel said “he has been raised, *as he said*”.

We remembered then that we had learned to trust what Jesus said.

Even when it turned our world upside down.

We had seen wind and waves obey his command, “Peace, be still”.

We had watched people healed, made whole, restored to their right mind at his word.

We had sat, uncomfortably sometimes, with him as he had eaten with tax collectors and other despised people, the ones outside respectable society.

We'd heard him speak words of forgiveness and acceptance which had transformed lives, which transformed our lives.

And we had listened to his words about the kingdom of heaven where the first were last and the last first, and how we needed to change and become like little children.

We who followed him, we women, had heard his word too, along with the men.

He had talked with us, taught us, affirmed us, treated us as equals in his company.

That was what was so different about Jesus, for us – we were human beings too in his community, equally children of the Father, equally called to follow him, equally challenged to live in new ways and to treat other people differently, with love, with forgiveness, with respect, with compassion, with generosity.

So there we were, face to face with the angel, remembering all that Jesus had said.

And we trusted Jesus' word – he had been raised from the dead!

God had raised Jesus, vindicating all he had said and done and lived, declaring as unmistakably as possible, “The reign of God has come near.”

So now what?

“Go”, said the angel, “go quickly and tell his disciples, he has been raised from the dead and is going ahead of you to Galilee, where you will see him.”

If you want to know how much Jesus changed the way we saw ourselves, there it is right there.

“Go quickly and tell his disciples”

Not “Go and bring them here so I can tell them”

Not even “Go and tell them and then bring them to see the empty tomb”.

Just “go and tell them” – and expect them to listen to you, to believe you, and to head for Galilee.

So we left, quickly, with fear and great joy. Hard to know how we were feeling, really – such energy was pumping through us, powerful emotions that could have been fear, could have been joy, definitely had some of both, and they gave our feet wings, as they say.

Until we were brought up short – because there he was, Jesus. Standing before us.

We fell to our knees before him in worship, reaching out and taking hold of his feet. The guards had taken hold of him at his arrest – but now we could hold him, in joy, in wonder, in worship.

And he repeated what the angel had said – don't be afraid, but go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me".

My brothers.

That was what was different from the angel.

My brothers.

They had deserted him, had fled into the night as the soldiers came for him in Gethsemane.

Peter had followed at a distance, had got right into the courtyard of the high priest as Jesus was questioned there, but then his courage had failed and he had denied him, vehemently, three times.

And now, in a word, Jesus made it clear that the desertion, the betrayal, the denials, all were forgiven.

It was right, really, that his first words to us brought release from fear and that forgiveness which covered everything that separated us from God. That's what we had found in Jesus from the beginning, and that's what he continued to offer us – forgiveness and freedom.

So we went as Jesus had told us. The empty tomb was behind us – Galilee lay ahead, and the promise that there we would see Jesus. That was where we had known Jesus before. We had met Jesus in Galilee, had followed him, had listened to him, had lived in his company.

Galilee was where we had begun to see the shape of God's dawning reign, bringing wholeness to the broken, good news to the poor, sight to the blind, rest to the weary, new relationships to those shunned and left on the outside.

When Jesus died it had seemed that that was the end of all that - the new way of living, new community, new dignity, freedom from fear, forgiveness. Jesus' dream of God's reign here among us had become our dream too - and when he died, it died too.

But now he was telling us, "Go, to Galilee, and you will see me".

Go to Galilee to live the dream again, to live as he lived - learning to love, to forgive, to have compassion, to treat everyone with dignity, to stand with people on the edges.

It didn't end in Galilee.

We did see him there, and then he said; "Go – to the ends of the earth"

I guess that's why you're here.

Where is Jesus calling you to go?