

Reflection



- Showing love
- Giving hope
- Bringing peace

The Church of St John & St Leonard

John 20 v 1 – 10
Sunday 19th April 2020

The Empty Tomb

¹Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. ²So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!"

³So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. ⁴Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. ⁶Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, ⁷as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen. ⁸Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. ⁹(They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.) ¹⁰Then the disciples went back to where they were staying.

I want to take you back to that very first Easter day, as we live that morning with the disciples, without the hindsight that we have now. Imagine Mary Magdalene, waking up in the dark, having fallen asleep sobbing the night before as she re-lived the agony of the last few days over and over again, facing up to the realisation that Jesus is dead and all her hopes are shattered. In the dark, she gets dressed slowly and quietly as she remembers that the Sabbath is over and that there is one last thing she can do for her Lord, to anoint his body with spices. Jesus found her in her darkest place and miraculously healed her, casting out 7 demons from her. Now in the darkness, she goes to do one last thing for him. She creeps out of the house, pulling her cloak around her against the early morning chill. Everything is still; it's as if the whole world is in shock, waiting and watching, uncertain of what the future holds. As she picks her way slowly through the gloom, Mary tries to focus on the task ahead of her, though anxious thoughts about how on earth they are going to move the stone away keep disturbing her concentration, causing her to flinch back as a branch catches her cloak and pulls her back. She stumbles and blinks back the tears. 'God help me' she whispers, though she wonders if God is listening at all – where is he in all this pain?

As she approaches the tomb, screwing up her eyes to see in the darkness, something seems not quite right. What is that large shadow next to the tomb? Why has the stone been moved away? She can barely believe her eyes. 'No', she cries out in utter despair,

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'who has taken him?' Turning around, she runs back the way she came, heedless of the danger, her feet bruised by the stones, rushing to tell those who can understand how she feels, those who also love Jesus; this is news she has to share, news she can't deal with on her own.

We know the rest of the story, don't we? Peter and John run to the tomb. John arrives first and looks inside, seeing the strips of linen lying there, but doesn't go in. Peter goes straight in and sees both those strips and the burial cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head but is now folded and separate; he calls John inside to look. The tomb is empty. The Bible records 'He saw and believed. (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead)'. So what did they believe? Did they believe that Mary was correct and that someone had stolen the body? Yet the facts don't fit – the grave clothes are there, the burial cloth that was around the head is folded and separate. These facts – the empty tomb with the stone rolled away, the grave clothes and the separate and folded burial cloth, the absence of a body – are resurrection proofs, but they are proofs the disciples cannot understand until they see the risen Lord. So the men go back home, debating, wondering, believing what exactly? Mary stays there by the tomb, crying and alone.

The first proofs of the resurrection, of God at work in His world, of the defeat of sin and death are there but it takes time to comprehend; the disciples need to see the risen Jesus to understand and to fully believe. Maybe that's where you are today – a mixture of doubt and faith, of belief and unbelief, knowing that Jesus must be at work, but struggling to see how and where? Let's have courage, as Mary did, to share our pain and confusion with one another, with those who know and understand, so that together we can pray that we might see the risen Lord even in the middle of this pandemic.

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