

Sermon for Easter Day

by the Revd Sue Rushton

There is one detail in John's account of Jesus' resurrection that has never struck me before in the same way as it has this year. It is that when Mary Magdalene first met the resurrected Jesus, she was on her own. She was separated from the other disciples – their fellowship seems to have fallen apart in the days since Jesus' arrest and they were all over the place. They had all been at the Last Supper and in the Garden of Gethsemane, but in the three days after that there is no indication at all of them coming together. Their small community was, for the time being, apparently fractured and they are mentioned in the narrative only as individuals, or in small groups.

Now, of course I don't want to push the parallels too far, but here we are, in 2020, celebrating the greatest day in our Christian calendar, a festival of joy and triumph and hope, with alleluias all over the place. **But we are doing all of that fractured, separated, as individuals or in small groups.** How strange it is without the real, physical presence of our church family around us. But this is where we are, and this is how we celebrate this year. For coronavirus or not, we do celebrate today – celebrate all the promise that God gives us through the glorious resurrection of his Son Our Lord. These difficult times will pass. We will get our bearings back and return to the relationships and communities that sustain us. And the joy of this day, despite the circumstances in which we celebrate it, is still real, for the new life given to us on this day by God is eternal, changeless, out of time and regardless of circumstance.

That's not to say, of course, that we are uncaring about the tragedies that surround us. We are all holding in our prayers those affected by this terrible pandemic. It hardly needs saying, but we do remain aware as we celebrate, that our world is suffering on a vast scale. And as always, when our world suffers, our loving heavenly Father suffers too. We are his creation, his children, and in his love for us, our pain is his pain.

In the resurrection Gospel, we heard of Mary Magdalene at Jesus tomb, grieving the loss of the Lord she loved. But when she got to the tomb, the body wasn't there. And in her shock and fear at finding the tomb empty, she ran back to Jerusalem to tell the disciples. They ran to the garden look for themselves, but not understanding what had happened, they went home, we are told, **and left Mary weeping there, alone again.** When Jesus appeared in the garden, Mary didn't recognise him at first – not until he called her by her name. And in her joy, she moved to touch him. A very natural impulse, but he stopped her 'Do not hold on to me', he said. It sounds harsh, but he had to make her understand that everything was different now. His earthly human life was over.

There is a temptation for us, too, to want to cling to the human Jesus. Through the Gospel accounts of him, we learn to love the Lord who lived as man. The familiar stories about his life tell us of one who healed the sick, who preached the good news of the love of God, who taught about the Kingdom in beautiful parables, who gave us a pattern of meekness and humility in the face of injustice and cruelty. But however much we know about the man Jesus, the human Jesus, that makes us love him, it is not enough, for it is still far too limited a view of him. There is more.

We would not, of course, be Christians without the Gospel stories about Jesus – they are vital to our faith – but we wouldn't be Christians either if that was all we knew. We know more. As Christians, we know, worship and follow not a God of the past, of history, but one that through his Son is present to us now, now in the midst of all we are going through. What our celebration today gives us is the security of knowing that our Lord is close beside us now as he always is. His ministry today is not limited by time or space or pandemic. By his resurrection, he shed the limitation of his ministry to first century Palestine and a small band of disciples.

Since then, he has been **available to all men and women, in all time, free and unrestricted** and his universal spiritual presence is no less close, no less real, no less loving that his human presence had been. On Easter morning, he appeared to Mary Magdalene to assure her of exactly that. She mustn't cling to the past, just as we mustn't. He is as available to us now in 2020 in York as he was then to her in the garden two thousand years ago. We can't see him, as she did, but we meet him in his spiritual presence – **he comes to us, he calls us by name, he makes of us witnesses to his resurrection, witnesses that he is alive today, alive in us, alive in our church, alive in our faith, alive in our worship, alive in our love, alive in our lives, risen and alive in our hearts. Christ is risen, alleluia, alleluia.**