

## **SERMON: Sunday – 9 April 2023 – Rev Alistair Cowper**

Death has been swallowed up in victory

Song of Songs 1:1-8

Mark 16:1-8

The three women, like the other followers of Jesus were devastated by his death. The death of a close friend or loved one does that to people. It can paralyse, stop one in one's tracks, so that the whole world feels out of kilter.

But the women show great strength when they resolve to get up and do what they could. They went to anoint the dead body. A final act of dignity and care that reveres the physicality of a person and acknowledges the sacred nature of humanity. If humans are made in God's image then they are sacred indeed.

This was no easy task for the women to do especially when there is a muckle, great stone across the entrance of the burial tomb. Who could possibly move it?

And yet, they went anyway. With no plans in place as to how this obstacle might be shifted. Was that simply a great step of faith? To go and do what they could despite the prospects of success in doubt? There's no guarantee they won't fail. They went anyway. It no doubt felt like the right thing to do.

There are times in life when one just knows what to do even in the face of uncertainty about the outcome. It feels like the right thing so I'm going to act like this is the right thing to do now. It might not be in a week's time but it feels right now.

And it's into this climate of uncertainty that Mark in his Gospel tells us in verse 4,

But when (the women) looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away.

And an angel with the news, he is not here, he is risen.

So the burial spices could wait for another occasion! This wasn't the day for them. This was a day for something new.

Though there would've been some who might've seen Lazarus raised from the dead or the only son of the widow of Nain raised or Jairus' daughter who'd died until Jesus came to her.

But we don't know whether these women had seen or heard of any of that - possibly they'd heard. But the fact that they ran trembling and bewildered from the tomb might suggest this was a complete shock to them. Too frightened to talk even, until they got to Peter and his companions and spilled the beans.

Mark's short ending to the Gospel, at the end of verse 8 (sometimes recorded as verse 9), finishes abruptly with Jesus himself sending the disciples out from East to West with the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation"

The NRSV translation puts it well in the words "Jesus himself sent out through them", the sacred proclamation.

It's Jesus who sends his Gospel through his messengers, through those frightened disciples and through all who have come to believe since, including us. He's not just sending us, he's sending his word, his good news, **through** us.

And we can take heart because our God is the obstacle moving God who goes ahead and prepares the way. Don't let obstacles put you off setting out.

In the Song of Songs, the young women of Jerusalem rejoice and delight in their beloved; they praise his love more than wine.

I suspect the women at the empty tomb, when they were able to speak, their tongues loosened, might've uttered such praise - we praise his love forever.

Because that's what Easter is all about; the love of God in Christ, the risen, saving love, the resurrecting, hope filling, obstacle shifting, love which endures all things, never gives up, and leaves graveyards empty.

Ashley Wilcox in The Women's Lectionary comments on why these two readings are together for Easter Sunday.

Calling it a fascinating juxtaposition, she comments that there is a deep yearning and longing contained within the poetic 'Song of Songs' for the one whom she longs for.

That longing and yearning amidst the feelings of loss, anger, despair and fortitude to carry on comes over in the accounts of Easter morning at the tomb. The women are filled with the practical concerns for their task,

wondering how they will roll the stone away, but what was driving them forward was the bond of love that still held them close.

The women are awestruck to fearful silence at the empty tomb. But they are called to action by the figure dressed in a white robe within the tomb. They are commissioned to go and preach the good news that Jesus is alive and going ahead of them.

Even before Peter and the other male disciples, the two Marys and Salome were called to carry the Word onwards. They were entrusted with the wonderful gift for the world, in their hands.

The building of a world in which the attributes of the Kingdom of God are central is a process that needs to be argued about and fought for. The hope that comes on Resurrection Sunday is one that inspires us that when events seem to be going wrong, when the road seems littered with obstructions, when the powers that harm and destroy what is good seem in the ascendent, that this is not the last word.

We are called to be part of the push towards kingdom values, and we do that because we recognise the bonds of love that hold us together, however distant they seem at any given time, they can grow and strengthen and heal and transform.

This glorious hope of Easter answers a yearning and longing for something positive and good, inviting us into the feast in joyful commitment and dedication.

I'll finish with a reflection taken from the Spill the Beans material for today. It's called, 'Incredible Witnesses':

In the garden  
making their way quietly to the tomb,  
eyes cast down, watching their step.  
Carrying precious ointment to anoint their Lord's body.  
That Sabbath must have seemed unending as they waited  
to care for their loved one  
like waiting for a funeral  
over a long weekend.  
Then reaching the tomb and seeing—what?  
A stone rolled back,  
an empty tomb  
and two angels— reminding them  
of all that he said. "Three days later..."

But they were women, prone to hysteria,  
talking nonsense.

It seems that, even then, the resurrection  
had to be verified by men.

But we know

that the ones who stuck with Jesus, the ones who waited at the cross,  
the ones who rose early in the morning to prepare his body for burial,  
the ones who nurtured and cared

from beginning to end

were women,

prone to exaggeration

and "idle tales".

But, on that day,

witnesses to resurrection,

the greatest news ever heard!

May we too be carriers of resurrection hope, in all we are and do and  
say. Until all around rises in death defying splendour. For Christ is Risen. He  
is risen indeed. Alleluia! Amen.