

We live in a day and age where news travels fast, don't we. Sometimes we even watch it as it is being made on our televisions screens. Sitting in the comfort of our houses we have a front line view of the good news occasionally and the bad news often. This week we watched the horror of another attack on innocent people in Kenya as the number of reported dead, mostly Christian sisters and brothers rose and rose. But no matter how close we are and how clearly we see, it is only later that the news can be interpreted and the implications worked out.

When we read this report of the first Easter Sunday morning it is a bit like watching the events on the TV screen of our imagination, as they unfold. All that is missing is the pictures, but it is not hard to see them in our minds eye. Here Mary, grieving and bereaved goes to the tomb of Jesus, just as many people sit in the graveyards of our land to mourn their loved ones. What a shock she had when she got there. The tomb was open. We sense her panic and it is not hard to imagine the disciples running and seeing that the body has disappeared, - puzzled, but slightly hopeful they return home, leaving Mary behind. And then the amazing story of first the angels and then Jesus himself appearing to Mary in the guise of the gardener. "I have seen the Lord", she said as she spread the good news to a group of cynical men.

Amazing events and there has been two thousand years of reflection on them ever since, with many different interpretations.

But the first thing I want to say about this amazing story is that there is little doubt that it is a historical story. There are a lot of people who would look at this story and not want it to be true. They have too much to lose, because if this is a true story it could make a difference to their lives. So they call it a religious myth designed to teach us something about our own condition perhaps in line with stories of the Hindu Gods. Hence all the fuss about books like the Da Vinci Code over the years, books and films that put forward a different explanation, much more appealing to our lazy generation who don't want to have to examine the facts but want an exciting novel to read.

I want to put two reasons forward this morning, and there are many more, as to why I believe the tomb was empty and Jesus was really alive.

Firstly, although all the gospels differ in the details of the story, they all agree that Mary Magdalene was the first person to discover that Jesus was alive and told the good news to the other disciples. Now this simple fact speaks volumes about the authenticity of the account - just because she was a woman. Women in those days were regarded as very inferior people indeed, or so it was enshrined in the Jewish law. They certainly had no say in the

running of anything, they were expected to stay at home, influencing the world by bringing up their families well and keeping quiet on everything else, they couldn't even be a witness in a court of law.

So to place a woman at the centre of the story of the resurrection was unthinkable. If this was a made up story, a work of fiction, it just wouldn't have happened.

But if it was a true story, if it was just a reporting of facts, if this is what happened, if a woman had really seen Jesus first, then John and the others wrote the truth, despite the fact that it put themselves in a lesser light. The story was true, everybody knew about it, so it had to be written down the way it happened.

And my second reason for the authenticity of the resurrection was the disciples themselves.

Here were eleven men, and a lot of women and then, said St Paul in our reading, 500 others including himself chosen by Jesus to be witnesses to the fact that they had seen the risen Saviour. Now that would be a massive conspiracy wouldn't it? I cannot imagine for a moment that the disciples, simple, honest men as they are revealed in the gospels could build a religion like the Christian faith on something that they knew wasn't true. After all, most of them died for the faith! Would you die for something you knew to be a lie?

No?, Christians believe that the events of Easter Sunday really happened, our faith is first and foremost an historical faith.

But secondly it is also a personal faith. Just look at how the risen Jesus dealt with this one woman. "Woman, why are you weeping" he said with love and concern, and then he revealed himself to her by calling her by name and asking her, a mere woman, to be the first person to take the good news to his friends. Despite the enormity of the implications of the resurrection to change the whole world, Jesus announced it first to one single person, tradition has it, a woman who was an ex prostitute. Quite amazing. And Christianity is still first and foremost an individual, personal faith as we put our trust in God, one by one, as he calls us by name. I love that line in the hymn I vow to thee my country which is all about heaven "And soul by soul and silently the shining bounds increase"

This Easter Sunday let us open our ears afresh to hear his individual call on our lives. Listen he calls your name!

So a historical faith, a personal faith and thirdly Christianity is a universal faith. Jesus laid down his life and rose again to transform, not just the individual, not just communities, but the whole human race to God. The implications of the resurrection are as big as that. He came to bring reconciliation, to put us right with God and one another.

I recently heard a fact about the role of the beekeeper. Now I do hope, if there are any beekeepers here, that my facts are right. When a beekeeper wants to bring two hives of bees together what he does is quite simple. He takes a hive and puts a wall of wax down the middle of it. Then he puts one swarm in one side and the other swarm in the other side and waits for it to happen. And what does happen is that the bees eat the wax wall and meet each other in the middle and mingle, it's as simple as that.

The sacrifice of Jesus is a bit like that. God gave up his only Son, who gave his life to bring people together and to bring us all, one by one to God as he calls our name. And He was consumed in the process.

But at the resurrection God lifted him up again and restored him to his rightful place in history, as king of kings and lord of lords.

Jesus is alive. History attests to it, personal experience is witness to it and through it we, even us, can come to God, be forgiven and reconciled to him and to one another. And just as he did with Mary, each person he calls he also give the job to be his witness in the world, to tell the good news of reconciliation. And just as he was a wax wall consumed in the process, so he calls each one of us to lay down our lives too in the great mission to bring people and God together, and to bring us all together into a new community. Before he died Jesus

prayed that his followers would be one, united in the great task to change the world.

Today, as we celebrate the wonderful, stunning facts of the resurrection let us commit ourselves anew to the task he gave his disciples and he has given us: to tell the world that God loves it, to spread the good news about the risen Jesus, to talk about the forgiveness available to everyone if they will turn to God, and to bring love, unity and reconciliation wherever we go. Amen