

The Strangeness of Easter...

... summoned, like Mary, by name

A sermon given on Easter Day 12th April 2020, in the Online Service by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker

John 20:1-18

So here we are, locked down, shut in our homes, unable to join together and celebrate the amazing Easter message of Jesus' victory over death.

Doing Easter on your own, or with just one or two others, feels most unnatural. This year, it's not a typical Easter at all.

And yet, when I stop to think about it, the first Easter may have had some parallels with our situation today. When you look at the Gospel accounts of the resurrection, it's amazing how intimate they are. No crowd scenes, no public displays. Just Peter and John running to the empty tomb. Just Mary by herself in the garden. A few disciples locked away in an upper room, afraid to go out. A couple of friends walking on the road to Emmaus. There's no shortage of social distance in the Easter story, which bodes well for us, as we wonder whether the risen Lord will come amongst us this Easter.

And when I say this isn't a typical Easter, I am, of course, talking nonsense. The phrase, 'typical Easter', is an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms. It shows how far we've domesticated Easter with our customs and rituals. I remember once being told off by a parishioner in another place, because we didn't sing, 'Jesus Christ is risen today' when she thought we should have done: certain things are expected, and if they don't happen, it isn't a proper Easter.

But of course, the whole point of Easter is that it's unprecedented. It has no parallel. It doesn't fit with previous experience. All we know is that dead people don't come back. So when one does, we don't know what to make of it. We've got no frame of reference.

That's exactly what people are saying about our current situation: that it's unprecedented, that there's been nothing like it in living memory, and that even in

wartime, people could still meet together, and find encouragement in the company of others.

So the novelty of Easter matches the novelty of our time. Both events invite a reappraisal, the recognition that nothing can be taken for granted.

Work we took for granted has ended or been suspended. Businesses we rely on are going under. All the economic principles of a Conservative government have been turned upside-down. Our basic right to see who we like, when we like, has gone out of the window. I've taken two funerals this week for families where fewer than six people were present because of the restrictions on public gatherings. Our whole way of life has been exposed as incredibly fragile; we're not used to not being in control; everything feels uncertain, unpredictable; and when this virus has run its course, we just don't know how much the world might have changed. Just now, it's not surprising many are feeling anxious and vulnerable, and not just about the risk of infection.

Easter also challenges us to abandon old certainties: the certainty, for example, that nothing really changes. The certainty that we are the products and captives of past experience. The certainty that God, if he's there at all, doesn't really make much difference. The certainty that life must always be lived in the shadow of death.

Easter holds out the possibility of radical newness. Of a new beginning, based on God's forgiveness and unconditional acceptance. The possibility of a life lived, not in the shadow of death, but in the light of eternal life. The possibility of a God who summons us out of our prison cells of fear and anxiety, to live lives of confident hope, of generosity and trust.

I love the way the accounts of the first Easter morning are full of bewilderment, of people just not understanding what was going on. It was too big, too strange, too new.

So as you grapple with the unfamiliarity of these days, with the strangeness of a world no longer able to manage its own basic routines, may you be open to the overwhelming strangeness of Easter, to the possibility of the world not after all being quite the place you thought it was. And may you, like Mary, find yourself addressed by the voice of a stranger, summoned by name, and in the depths of your being

know yourself to be set free from your captivity, whatever it might be, and set upon a new path, illumined by the light of his eternal presence, and his resurrection love.

Reading Texts

John 20: 1-18

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.' Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went towards the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

Jesus Appears to Mary Magdalene

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' She said to them, 'They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.' When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?' Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.' Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew, Rabbouni! (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, 'Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her