

Easter day 2020

It's early on the first Easter Sunday. The two Mary's are on their way to the tomb. We learn different things from the different Gospel writers and it's Matthew who describes the earthquake and that it's the Angel who rolls away the stone.

Matthew is not alone in mentioning the heavenly actors, the signs and portents that occur when God breaks through into the ordinary routines of our world. An angel and angel choir at the incarnation. God speaks at Jesus Baptism. Moses and Elijah at the transfiguration and here at the resurrection we have angels again. There is no ordinary, earthly way to describe and comprehend resurrection. God has broken through into the routines of our world; death is overcome.

The angel in Matthew's gospel seems quite a chirpy character. He rolls back the stone and sits on it. The final symbol of death and our separation from a loved one becomes nothing other than a place to sit and pass the time while waiting for uncomprehending disciples to show up. Death – where is your sting??

And this angel seems particularly keen to turn the place into an exhibit of absence as in "nothing to see". There are the discarded grave clothes but the whole point is that he's not there and he wasn't there when he rolled back the stone. The Angel didn't let Jesus out, he had already risen.

When we moved to Nottingham in 2004 Katherine was keen to drive the children around and show them her home-town. I recall the children were deeply unimpressed by "the gates of the house we used to live in" "the gates of the school I used to go to" "the shops I walked to with my twin". As far as they were concerned there was nothing to see here.

There can be no finer illustration on Easter Sunday morning than of an empty tomb, discarded graveclothes and a chirpy Angel saying, "he is not here, he has been raised".

The empty tomb speaks clearly of death being overcome, but that is just the beginning, as is the forgiveness of sins. When the first disciples began preaching to the crowds and sharing the good news they didn't start with Jesus birth or ministry or miracles, they started with his resurrection and authority over sin and death.

Hebrews Chapter 10 speaks of Christ's sacrifice being once and for all and to those being made holy it says "This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord.

I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds."¹⁶

¹⁷ Then he adds: "Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more."¹⁷

¹⁸ And where these have been forgiven, sacrifice for sin is no longer necessary.

We do not need to offer sacrifices for sins because it has been done for us. Christ gave himself for us.

Angels and earthquakes are hardly going to have a calming influence on the disciples however encouraging their words. This year I seem more aware of how bewildered, uncertain and shocked the disciples must have been. Unlike us they don't have old and new testament and they haven't put the pieces together yet. The ordinary routines of the world have been overturned by God's intervention and they are yet to understand.

I envy the two characters who walked out of Jerusalem on the road to Emmaus. Incognito, Jesus draws alongside and having found out what's troubling them begins to explain and interpret the scriptures so that their understanding may grow. I wonder if Jesus quoted Isaiah?

Isaiah 53:5&6

But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.

⁶ We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

It tells us that as they walked, their hearts burned within them.

I was thinking about that on Maundy Thursday while in the Park. I'd just spotted these baby characters* and a piece of music came to mind. It builds and builds and builds until there is a triumphant crescendo and I could imagine their joy growing and growing and growing and then Jesus is revealed to them.

On this lockdown Easter the words that resonate with me and bring me joy are the Angels opening words. Do not be afraid. It seems that every time an angel appears in the bible they have to start with "do not be afraid" – they must learn that on day one of angel college. How do you know you have been visited by an angel? 1. You will be afraid and 2. They will tell you not to be afraid. I note that the Angel failed to mention this to the Guards who fell down in a swoon. The angel speaks with authority because he is a messenger directly from God who holds all authority.

In an extended essay on Matthew 28, Martin Copenhagen says this.

When the angels say 'do not be afraid' or when Jesus says 'fear not' it is not the assurance that nothing can go wrong, because often things do go wrong. It is not the assurance that everything will turn out for the best, because if we are honest, it seldom does.

Rather, it is the assurance that, whatever may happen to us, whatever a day may hold, God has the power to strengthen us and uphold us; that whatever we must face, we do not face it alone; that nothing we encounter is stronger than God's love; that ultimately God gets the last word; that in the end (and sometimes even before the end), God's love is triumphant.

We are living through an extended Easter Saturday – not a modern one with an Easter vigil or Easter eve service (which I always feel is kind of jumping the gun) but like the first disciples what must have seemed like an eternity of waiting and waiting fearfully. We need to hear the words being spoken to us and impressive as the angel is no doubt...let it be Jesus speaking.

Greetings. Do not be afraid.

Lord Jesus as we offer you our worship on the strange locked down Easter Sunday, set us free by the power of your Spirit. Free from fear, free even in our isolation, free to experience God's love in a new and transforming way. This we ask in Jesus name. Amen.



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