

Easter Sunday 2018

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And that is how Mark's gospel finishes: the women fled from the tomb, terrified, and said nothing to anyone.

Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome clearly have not read their script right!

Back at the start of the story of Jesus, God sends his angel to the young virgin Mary, and despite her alarm and fear, she says 'yes', and risks the consequences. Now here are some other Marys being first on the scene of the empty tomb, and God has specially put an angel in the tomb to meet them, explain the situation and ask them to take a message to the disciples.

And they daren't.

And they don't.

This is so wonderfully real, and untidy, and unsatisfactory as an ending that it really rings true!

Of course they are terrified, it doesn't add up at all that the stone has been rolled away to open the tomb, there is no body inside, only a youth loitering in the empty tomb who seems to know too much about them.

These are strange and dangerous times:

it had already gone horribly wrong with Jesus being arrested and tortured to death; it was not safe to be known to be associated with him.

Not safe!: Run, and keep quiet!

Then stop and think.

What has happened to his body?

Did anyone here play an April Fool on anyone this morning? Or get caught by one?

Tell us ...?

There is another hour and a half in which it might happen,

"How does that make you feel? What's it like for you to be the subject of an April Fool joke?"

Turn to the person next to you and we'll have a couple of minutes to exchange thoughts about how it feels to have an April Fool played on you.

Anybody want to feed back?

Most of us would probably admit to some degree of discomfort at being made a fool; we prefer to retain our dignity, not show confusion or be caught off balance.

Most of us probably want to avoid being even a little humiliated, laughed at, or mocked for falling for the trick. (And yes, I use the word mocked deliberately to remind us that Jesus has been there before us, he suffered every aspect of his self being abused, all forms of human suffering he took on himself, to be one with us).

I wonder if the women, running from the empty tomb, felt something of that foolishness and potential humiliation for not being able to answer that question: "What happened to his body?"

I wonder what we would answer if someone asked us, in 2018? Having read the gospels many many times, knowing the story as well as some of us do, what would we answer if someone asked us "What happened to his body?"

None of us have any technical explanations. The whole question of how Jesus was raised back to a new and different quality of body, and how we will one day be raised, as he promised, is beyond our experience.

It might make us uncomfortable if we want or are demanded to give an explanation, but not understanding doesn't make it any less true.

Let's try something else: I'm going to ask you to share with the person next to you, if you will,

"What brought you to church today?"

Take a minute to think about it first;

it might be that you are staying with someone who 'does' church';

it might be that you felt you 'had to', in which case, try and unpack that feeling a little.

I'm not going to ask you to share anything now but perhaps you can continue those conversations over coffee or lunch?

Because therein lies the answer to the question,
“What happened to his body?”

First, let's go back to the empty tomb, and what we know from the other gospel accounts.

Were God's plans spoiled by the women being afraid and saying nothing?

Of course not, though perhaps slowed down.

Because when the disciples did get to see or hear about the empty tomb, they too, of course, were afraid and unable to comprehend.

So afraid, that instead of going to Galilee, they locked themselves into their house.

Jesus patiently, and lovingly, goes to meet them where they are, shows himself and his wounds to them saying 'peace be with you', there, in the locked room.

He accompanies two of them on the road to Emmaus.

In John's gospel account, he appears to Mary Magdalene and is mistaken for the gardener: the four gospels tell it different ways but all with the same pattern.

Jesus appears to the disciples in small groups, loving and reassuring them, helping them understand *is* he, and he *is* real, and he *is* changed but no less alive – in fact more alive as he is now wholly divine: spirit enough to pass through locked doors but solid enough to be eating and drinking with them.

The first reading we heard was from Acts, which is a journal-like account of what the disciples did in the time immediately following Jesus resurrection.

From this we know that the disciples did travel widely, sharing what they had witnessed first-hand, and been taught face to face by Jesus before his death, as well as his resurrection appearances.

The teaching and stories of witness are told from generation to generation.

There is every reason, and historical and archeological evidence, that these accounts that have passed down are reliable and true.

I calculated that the number we are here today, is about the number of generations that have lived since Jesus' time on earth. So if I were to tell you [*Fiona*], “Jesus is risen”, and you were to tell it to the next person, [*x*] “*Jesus is*

risen”] and so on right around the church, it would be about like each telling the next generation from the time of Jesus’ life, to us today.

(However, I also calculated that might take three and a half minutes, so we haven’t time to try it!)

I can be told these accounts of Jesus’ ministry, passed down to me, and learn from them.

And I am required to tell others in my turn, but they alone are not sufficient. We have to know Jesus through our own direct experience of him. And that is how he lives now: if we look for him and ask him to come and find us – literally ask him as you would an unseen person - we gradually build up a strength of belief.

It is gradual, and it changes us as we get closer and deeper.

We shouldn’t be surprised at this because he came so that we could find a new way to know God through him, and he told his disciples that he was leaving his Spirit to continue his work in all people who ask and believe in him.

If, when you shared your reason for coming today, it was about a ‘have to’, a longing, a rightness, a belonging: these are all the Spirit’s way of calling us and drawing us closer.

Closer to God in worship but also closer to each other.

Sharing in that special quality of relationship that is Christian fellowship: that is being church; that is being for and with each other, inter-dependently and lovingly, that comes from a different part of us than the bit of us that likes or dislikes; sits deeper and beyond friendship.

It is what we aspire to be, in the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

It is what helps us be the hands and feet for Jesus’s continued work of caring for others.

It is what makes us the risen body of Christ.

Look around you: *We* are what happened to Jesus’ body!