

*Easter Sunday, Dawn Vigil, 12 April 2020,
Matthew 28:1-10
Alison Hobbs*

I wonder if you noticed that these candles are the same ones we had on Good Friday?

At that service, they were blown out, as each aspect of Jesus' suffering and rejection was cited.

This morning, they have been lit again as the first light that the new light touches.

Not only does that undo the extinguishing – reverse the dark that had come upon the world – there are new, little lights that connect – more light than ever, and light that joins everything together now.

Those things that stopped on Good Friday – the disciples hopes, the friendship that finished badly, the teaching they have no more time to consolidate, pain un-healable, the corruptions and deceptions that seem to have won – all those things have been reversed – and so much more: all the connections in the great story of redemption are beginning to be made and understood by the disciples, by us.

The love that is Christ in us, connecting us, and lighting the world.

If we had been able to use our church, and be together, we would have passed that new light first between ourselves.

It would have represented all the hope and newness of Easter, it would have joined us together, as we passed it person to person: you have to be quite close for that manoeuvre!

Today we are not commemorating an historic event:

this is not the two thousand and something anniversary of the Rising of Christ – well, it is, in factual, historic terms, but that isn't enough to get us up early! - this is a celebration of a new event that is taking place today;

God does not operate in time, he is in all time, so today is like a window that opens, spanning all time and allowing us to participate in The Resurrection that happened and happens, forever and ever.

The continuity of telling that story is entrusted to the disciples, its captured in scripture, and harnessed in worship.

It matters that the story is told right, and told well, so I pondered, in preparing to today's service, over the question of what to take out and what to leave in.

I weighed up two main questions:

what does this part of the service contribute, signify to people? and how does this part translate for zoom?

Well, I've ended up shortening it by one hymn but otherwise, not cutting a single word of the liturgy!

I felt continuity was really important for us, not just the richness of tradition that allows us to go deeper each time, but also, when so much else is different about this year's Easter, having a known starting point for interpreting our own response to Easter, I thought would be helpful.

And let's face it, this is a niche service for nerds!

So, you will get the opportunity to renew your vows, silently, or aloud, with each other, or solo with God.

Lacking a font, I thought we would use the water jar and bowl that was used on Maundy Thursday, representing the loving service that is at the heart of the new commandment given to us this Easter.

Now I'm not entirely ignoring the readings – though I'm going to only touch lightly, and on the gospel, except to remind you that this service is The big story telling service of the year, designed to showcase the movement of God in the world from the beginning to forever and ever: the headlines of his activity to date.

(I wonder what the next decade or two will add?)

Turning to the gospel, the aspects that jumped out at me were firstly, the thunderbolt effect on the two Marys and the guards, who thought they were guarding/visiting, a grave, when an earthquake and a terrifying angel frighten them nearly to death. Their predictable world turns unpredictable: a feeling very prevalent globally, just now; and a sense of being caught in a story in which one cannot immediately predict the direction, or conclusion.

Reading on, we find that Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, are quickly reassured by the angel, and subsequently by the appearance of the risen Christ, that there is a future and promise that changes their whole demeanour from pure fear, to great joy. Reading beyond what we are given today, we learn that the guards get a bribe from the authorities to try to counter with a false rumour, which gets no traction.

The risen Lord is quick to make himself known to those with whom he has a relationship, first to the Marys, and then through them, to the others, with the message that they, too, will see Jesus when they reach Galilee.

As we go through the Easter season we will hear more of this from the Acts of the Apostles, and at the 10:15 service, will hear more about how puzzling that 'seeing' Jesus was for Mary. We know from these accounts that this was not a physical resurrection but a spiritual one, of such substance that they experience Jesus as entirely real, though somehow, dimensionally different.

Now, I don't know how to introduce this next thought without you leaping to a 2+2 makes 4 sort of response: so try and suspend that triggering ... The next thought I'd like to share is that we all knew, said, we'd 'see' each other this morning, and I feel I have - I am, with you in a way that satisfies pretty well all my senses (not being a particularly huggy sort of person). The point I'm wanting to make is nothing about the mystery of the risen Christ but one about us: how many physical senses have to be triggered, or not, for us to experience and grow our relationships whilst not physically present to each other?

Can we deepen a friendship through telephone calls: I'd say so. I'd also say through texts on occasion, through emails, through lovely handwritten letters. I can learn what makes other people tick by reading about them, or their published writings. I can feel emotionally informed and changed by works of art and creation.

I can experience real worship, alongside others, on zoom.

And what of the sacraments?

Well I'm on the easy side of the screen, but we are fed by the sacraments through faith. Physically, virtually, its only and enormously, a gift and grace of faith that we receive. The Holy Spirit knows no barriers, neither screens, distance or language. We can no more contain the Holy Spirit as direct it; but we can seek, and seeking will find, and finding will receive.

Jesus was quick to make himself known to those in relationship with him; he is not far, he is not in lockdown in any church, or frustrated by any screen, distance or language but right with each of us, longing to continue to feed and nourish and grow us through faith with thanksgiving.

He gave us a physical means of remembering and making that connection with him but its efficacy relies on our faith,
it is spiritual food,
it is, therefore, not dependant on the physical but on the spiritual, and on the grace of faith:
its harder to sense but no less real in the spiritual realm.

Where faith is present, God is at work: we will have to each find our own way to acknowledge that.

The distinction between the virtual and the physical is tantalising, and is presented uniquely to Easter people as we learn how to meet, trust, hope, and follow, this year, and into the future.

Alleluia! The Lord is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!