

St Brandon's, Sermon for Easter Morning Vigil

Matthew

Watch and See

Alison Hobbs

Those of us who came to the afternoon service on Friday will have heard Mike describing Good Friday through the image of a painting being gradually revealed, a painting of the Last Judgement. He drew a parallel between that and how Good Friday reveals a picture of the cruel and corrupt world we inhabit, then and now.

If we had heard Matthew's version of the Good Friday events, not John's, we would have seen even more cruelty, corruption and apparent abandonment: a harsh and barbaric crucifying of all hope. And, we would have understood where these guards fit in!

The guards are there because Matthew tells us that the day after Jesus' burial, the chief priests and pharisees petitioned Pilate to put soldiers on guard to make sure the disciples couldn't steal the body and claim the resurrection that Jesus had told them would happen on the third day after his death. The first thing the guards did was seal the massive stone at the cave mouth to ensure it was secure. Their confidence in its security was evident.

Hardly surprising they faint with shock and fear at the figure, as brilliant and white as lightening and snow, the very earth shaking as it appeared, that effortlessly rolled away the stone to sit defiantly, majestically upon it ... and speak.

Matthew goes on to tell us that after the women had gone, some of the guards went to tell the priests and elders what had happened. Perhaps they, too, had felt the earthquake because they evidently believed the guards about the awesome and shocking event the guards had witnessed, and believed that the tomb was empty.

They would have been aware of the previous earthquake that happened as Jesus breathed his last on the cross and the temple curtain tore in two; knew the power and implications of this. What should they do in the face of this demonstration of divine force? Not, it would seem, believe the truth that everything pointed towards. The best plan they thought, was to pretend what happened was what they feared might happen, that the disciples would steal the body. So they bribed the guards with a large sum of money to put that story about.

The story was not convincing, since the disciples were not in the vicinity. A substantial contingent of soldiers were involved in watching over the stone chamber they had securely sealed. The same two women who had returned to pay respects at the tomb were the ones who had watched the very dead body of Jesus being placed in there by Joseph of Arimathea, with the express permission of Pilate: there was no mix up about which tomb Jesus was in.

This may feel a minor part of just one gospel writers' recordings but it would have been a significant question on the streets, immediately following rumours and sightings of Jesus' resurrection. It shows us that the picture was not so very different in the immediate aftermath, and isn't so very different now: conspiracy theories, being economical with the truth, that euphemism for lying, are plagues of our time. Corruption, bribery, manipulation of the masses through state control of what is said, and allowed to be said happens now as then. Fear and oppression by these means is very much part of what keeps our world in the dark.

The creation story starts with separation of dark and light; that light that darkness will never overcome came into our world and is alive and risen – we know it and name it today. We know it not because history says the evidence was stacked against believing the 'fake news' the bribed guards were telling. Nor because of the numerous faithful believers who have testified to the faith since then. But because we can testify to the faith for ourselves, from our own experience. However oblique or fleeting, when we have felt God at work in us, in our lives, we have known the power of the living Word, the risen Christ.

God is the great revealer. Now we see only dimly, then we will see face to face. Sometimes we feel the grace of God moving us through events that

would otherwise be beyond our capacity to cope but generally, we can't see what God is up to in our lives in the moment. However, with time and perspective, as we look back we begin to see shapes, the puzzle pieces come together and we are amazed at the picture they reveal. With what detail God attends to our needs and fashions our choices. God may even become visible in every detail of certain events, once we arrive at a place of understanding.

The gospel story reveals the ways the risen Christ is going to work. The way he asks us to work.

Mary Magdalene and another Mary have gone once more to the tomb, gone to be near, seeking solace this way, this sort of 'looking for him' by being near because where else do we want to be when we have lost the most loved and precious person in our lives? I picture their love as akin to that description in the Song of Solomen we use in the marriage service, *"for love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame."*

The guards have gone to the tomb as servants of those who opposed Jesus. If any disciples try to come and interfere with the tomb, the soldiers are ready to kill them. When it is opened by a supernatural force, it is they who fall as dead to the ground; their fear is mortal, akin to the terror of the Last Judgement, knowing they've been batting on the wrong team.

But the two Marys, already almost dead with love and grief at the loss of him who they believed was the son of God, they come alive. They too, are filled with fear but this is the kind akin to awe and wonder – and great joy.

It seems a hallmark of divine unearthly beings: angels of God and the risen Christ alike, to start their messages with the phrase, 'Do not be afraid,' to calm their audience and make them ready and receptive to their message. This message is that Jesus has been raised from the dead and to look in the open, empty tomb as illustration – it is empty, its purpose finished.

It wasn't only the empty tomb that was the evidence but the message they were to take to the disciples that they will see him in Galilee. Galilee, where first they encountered Jesus, unlikely Galilee, that place of no political influence, a backwater of poverty. That rang true. Trustingly, they follow

these divine instructions and unexpectedly are interrupted by an encounter with Jesus – and recognise him! and fall at his feet, holding them (this is no apparition!) and worshipping.

They must now be obedient to their part in the task, and leave the wonder of being in his risen presence to assure the disciples of the truth – although they will have to wait and travel to Galilee to meet him and hear the next instructions.

The shape, reduced to a minimum are three very clear instructions to the two women who had lost all hope. This is the shape we meet when we face catastrophe. It starts with a divine invitation or prompting to do those same three things. Not to be afraid. To look full-on at the situation and believe you can move on and put things behind you because new life is possible. Then to move on in trust, not needing to see the whole picture because all will become revealed further down the line – once you have reached Galilee!

New life, resurrection is the extraordinary gift Jesus wins for us in his going through betrayal, injustice, torture and death to emerge the other side in the fullness of the promise God makes, that he is faithful to his children for all eternity. I'll leave you with a question. Can we trust enough to risk much and learn resurrection in our lives?

Amen