

Sermon for Easter Day 2020

In the days following Easter Sunday morning, Mary Magdalene and the other disciples get a huge surprise. Having seen Jesus placed in the tomb, they see only darkness ahead. All their hopes are dashed. All that remains is to see that Jesus' body is looked after properly. The mourning begins, made all the harder because of the expectations they had about Jesus' purpose here on earth.

But the tomb is empty. Is this another, unpleasant, development? The story takes another twist as the risen Jesus appears. Sometimes, those close to a person who has died still see that person in the days after a death, as they struggle to cope with what has happened. But the risen Jesus is no ghost or creation of a distressed imagination. He speaks and makes plans. He still has more to do before he departs.

At the end of today's Gospel reading the disciples have learned that Mary has seen Jesus. We don't know what they think about it. Perhaps they think that she has imagined it all. They may assume that extreme grief is

causing her to hallucinate. Struggling to come to terms with their own grief, Mary's story might have been an unwelcome intrusion. On the other hand, they might have believed her straight away. After all, in John's account, Peter had seen the empty tomb.

Whatever they thought, the surprise was going to get more surprising as the days moved on.

Under normal circumstances we would arrive at church, on a lovely spring day expecting to hear the story of that first Easter Day. Indeed we have heard it, but in a different context given the current situation. In one way this is a good thing, it means that we are taken out of the usual context in which we would normally hear this story – the context of sitting in our usual pews. Today we hear this story differently. We may have heard this story many times before. We may have been to church on countless Easter Days and know the story well. We know what to expect of our Easter service as we say together: "Alleluia, Christ is risen. He is risen indeed, alleluia!"

Today however, we are not hearing the story as we always

have done.

Again, I say, this is a good thing because it helps us remove the filters through which we have read and heard the gospel in the past. It means that we might be more able to break the mould and be more attentive to the unexpected within the story.

We should expect the unexpected from a God who surprised the disciples by raising Christ from the dead. In the days between Easter and the ascension, the disciples didn't know when Jesus might appear, or what he might say. He kept on surprising them. The events of Pentecost were even more astonishing. Think of the reaction on Twitter if it all happened today. The expectations for the effect on the world would be huge.

If we allow it and are prepared to look deeper, God will surprise us by working in our lives. The effect could be as huge for us as it was that first Easter. The resurrection is the beginning. If we want to be surprised we must look more closely at the stories, and look for the surprises as we go about our daily lives. If we become more attuned to

what God is doing, and accept the unexpected turns in our paths, we will find ourselves moving forward in ways we never imagined or thought possible. I am sure that no one actually enjoys the changes that have been put upon us, we have been rudely shaken out of our comfort zone. But when we think about not just the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus, but of those first followers of Jesus we see something interesting. The shocking rearrangement of their daily lives led them to see their world differently and ultimately to see God differently.

It can be tempting to live as pre-resurrection Christians, bound by time and place, with limited possibilities. But the resurrection changes everything and it can change us too if we let it. Can we look more closely and find the God who isn't bound by our fixed interpretation of the same old stories? Do we have the courage to accept a life where God constantly interrupts and surprises us? If we can, we may be able to say, with Mary Magdalene, "I have seen the Lord."