

Of all the questions about what did or didn't happen at the first Easter, 'Did Jesus really rise from the dead?' is surely the most fundamental and important question that can be asked of our Christian faith.

Indeed, Jesus's resurrection is THE revelatory event which attests to the truth of our faith. Without it, the whole gospel message of our salvation through Christ's saving grace does not stand up to scrutiny. It shatters like a chocolate Easter egg dropped from on high onto a tiled floor.

For evidence, you need look no further than our Acts reading where Peter tells Cornelius who was both a Roman gentile centurion and an enquiring fledgling Christian that God raised Jesus from the dead on the third day. Nothing about his birth, ministry or teachings. And by doing so, all of us are blessed with the wonderful hope and promise that those who believe in Jesus, even though they die, will have their own resurrection too.

After Friday's almost slow-motion action of Jesus's death on the cross, today's narrative starts at breath neck speed with Mary racing off to tell the disciples what has happened. It's as if her words act almost as a starting pistol for Peter and the one whom Jesus loved to race to the empty tomb. Integral to the story that Peter and John are though, they are in effect the support cast to Mary Magdalen, and it is her role in the Easter story that I want to focus on today.

Mary is assumed to have originally lived in the town of Magdala – hence her surname. When our pilgrimage group visited the excavated Magdala in Israel, there was this newly commissioned life size statue of her and Jesus which drew one and all to it like some supernatural magnet.

Yet we know hardly anything about Mary from the gospels. Mark and Luke tell us that she had seven demons cast out from her early in Jesus's ministry and Luke adds that she was one of Jesus's wealthier followers who funded his ministry. That's it. Full stop.

But, despite this lack of previous detail, Mary's importance is shown not only by the fact that she is specifically named as being present at the crucifixion by the three gospel writers who name individuals present but also the only person mentioned as being at the empty tomb in all 4 gospels. That truly is remarkable when you think about all the inconsistencies and different details given in the four accounts.

And John gives her an even greater accolade by making her the first person to see and meet the risen Christ when she returns and stands alone outside the empty tomb.

There she is feeling the full force of her loss, weeping uncontrollably, and it is easy to understand why. All she had wanted to do was complete the last act of the burial custom by anointing the dead body of the man who meant everything to her. A final act of devotion and discipleship for her Lord. Yet even that has been denied her.

Think back to the events surrounding the Hull funeral parlour scandal last year and the reported outrage, anger, despair and bewilderment of over 100 families who discovered the burial of their loved ones had taken place with the wrong body or ashes or, indeed, even without the body or ashes. Many were reported as being too upset or scared even to revisit the funeral parlour, never mind the grave.

Yet here is Mary, despite the emotional turmoil that has overwhelmed her over the past few days, plucking up the courage not only to return to the empty tomb for a second time, but also to challenge two interlopers there. That is bravery, without doubt.

Then she turns to the man she believes may have been responsible for removing Jesus's body, and surprisingly she does not even get angry – the strongest and most common behavioural response to bereavement. Instead, with a remarkable degree of calmness and politeness she simply asks to be told where the body is so she can get him.

Note that she says: "I will get him – not – we will get him". That's amazing determination considering it took two men, Joseph and Nicodemus, to place Jesus's body in the tomb.

And let us not forget that John confirmed Mary had walked to the tomb whilst it was still night. In darkness. And I cannot help but think back to earlier in John's gospel when Jesus says: "I am the light of the world" and wonder if Mary was present then. Probably. And here she is now - in darkness - coming to Jesus, the light of the world. Although she does not know that, as she arrives back at the tomb.

What a lovely metaphor for one's faith journey, and particularly reflecting the image in Psalm 23 "yea though I walk through the shadow of the valley of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me".

Through heavily tear stained eyes, Mary had merely seen a gardener, not her beloved Jesus. That is, until he calls out her name....Mary. That one word changes her life, forever.

Immediately she recognises him by his voice. It doesn't take much imagination to cast your mind back to when Jesus was teaching in Jerusalem before his death and said, "I am the good shepherd" and that a good shepherd calls his sheep by name. What's more they follow him because they recognise his voice.

Also, I don't know about you, but I can't help but think that Mary was both right and wrong in her assumption that the figure was a gardener. Wrong, because it was Jesus she saw but didn't recognise, and right because in a way this is the new creation. Jesus is the new Adam, the gardener charged with bringing the chaos of God's creation into flower and fruitfulness.

And Mary's response to finally recognising Jesus is to fling her arms around him and cling on to him in just the same way that my youngest granddaughter Evie usually clings on to her mother when she thinks her mother is going somewhere without her.

But unlike my little Evie when told to let go, Mary certainly doesn't seem to take Jesus's words as a rebuff because she leaves with joy and obedience in her heart as she goes to share her further news with the disciples.

Entrusting Mary to share that news shows not only that Jesus treated Mary in just the same way as he did his disciples, but also by giving her that responsibility shows that women are vital to Jesus's ministry and that she fully deserves the honorific title accorded her of 'the Apostle's Apostle'. And let's not forget that she stayed and stood with Jesus, right to his last breath, when all except John of his original 12 disciples had abandoned him in fear of their own lives.

At the very start of John's gospel, he reveals that the light of Christ has been with humankind from the very beginning of creation. It is trustworthy and never fades. No shadow can overcome or destroy it - and that is reflected in today's story of Mary Magdalen. She shows us that our personal times of despair and darkness can be replaced by hope. The hope that is found in the risen Christ.

Alleluia! Christ is risen. **He is risen indeed. Alleluia!**

Amen

Rev. Terry Ward-Hall, 20 April 2025