

Jesus is alive?!

Easter – 9 April 2023

BIBLE READINGS

[Psalm 118:1-2, 15-17, 21-24 \(responsively\)](#)

Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
his love endures for ever.

Let Israel say: 'His love endures for ever.'

Shouts of joy and victory

resound in the tents of the righteous:

'The Lord's right hand has done mighty things!

The Lord's right hand is lifted high;

the Lord's right hand has done mighty things!'

I will not die but live,

and will proclaim what the Lord has done.

I will give you thanks, for you answered me;

you have become my salvation.

The stone the builders rejected

has become the cornerstone;

the Lord has done this,

and it is marvellous in our eyes.

This is the day that the Lord has made;

let us rejoice and be glad in it.

[John 20:1-18](#)

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!'

So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the cloth that had been wrapped round Jesus' head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen. Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed, for as yet they did not understand from

Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead. Then the disciples went back to where they were staying.

Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.

They asked her, 'Woman, why are you crying?'

'They have taken my Lord away,' she said, 'and I don't know where they have put him.' At this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realise that it was Jesus.

He asked her, 'Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?'

Thinking he was the gardener, she said, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him.'

Jesus said to her, 'Mary!'

She turned towards him and cried out in Aramaic, 'Rabboni!' (which means 'Teacher').

Jesus said, 'Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."'

Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples: 'I have seen the Lord!' And she told them that he had said these things to her.

MESSAGE Jesus is alive?!

When we are worried or anxious about something, when do we have our worst thoughts? Often it's at three or four in the morning when everything is dark and we can't quite manage to see or grasp what's really going on. And so we fret and roll over and try and go back to sleep.



I imagine Mary Magdalene having this sort of anxious, interrupted sleep.

She was there at the cross on Good Friday.

She saw Jesus die and saw where Jesus was buried.

Her hopes, her dreams, her teacher and Lord were all gone now.

And she had all of Saturday – the Sabbath day – to sit at home and grieve her loss and ponder what on earth she would do with her life now that Jesus was gone.

At some point early on Sunday morning she decided that rather than toss and turn with her dark thoughts, she would get up and go to the tomb where Jesus had been buried.

It was still dark.

Mary went to the tomb to grieve, to be alone with her thoughts, to weep in solitude.

But when she gets to the tomb, there is a **surprise**.

The large stone used to seal up the typical stone tomb had been removed.



More grief! Grave robbers must have been there and stolen the body!

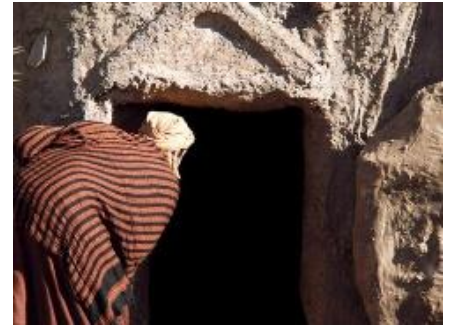
According to Matthew's Gospel this was one of the explanations that quickly took root to explain the missing body of Jesus. Today we might call it a **conspiracy theory** that the temple authorities instigated.

Mary is shocked and runs back into the city and finds two of Jesus' inner circle – Peter and John – and tells them that Jesus' body is missing.

Mary is the first witness of the empty tomb.



We then have the turn of the male disciples ... as Peter and John run to the tomb. It's probably close to dawn now. A new day is beginning.



John peers inside and sees the grave clothes lying there, but no body.

Peter – of course – goes right into the tomb and sees the grave clothes and separately the cloth that would have been around Jesus' head.

Then John goes into the tomb, sees and **believes**.

So John is the first person to have faith that Jesus was raised to life, even without seeing Jesus alive again. This is a new insight, a new hope, especially for later believers like us.

But this new found faith is tempered by the statement that the disciples **did not understand** that Jesus must rise from the dead.

Like a good detective story, this Gospel has dropped a number of hints that suggest that **life** would win out over **death** ... but of course the disciples knew that dead people do not live again, a belief that most of us also share.

Yet there are those hints ... back in chapter 10 of this Gospel when Jesus calls himself the Good Shepherd, he says ...

The Father loves me because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.

Or in chapter 11, when Jesus visits the tomb of Lazarus who has been dead and buried for four days ... and *calls him back to life ... showing that life after death is possible.*

Or all the many references to **life** in this Gospel ...

*That when God's word became flesh in Jesus what came into being was **life***

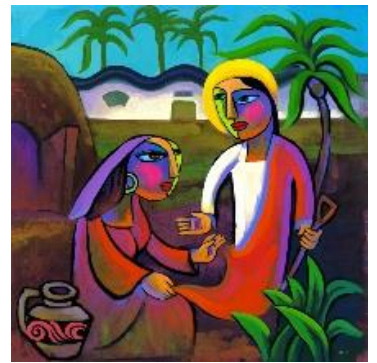
*that Jesus called himself the **resurrection and the life**, and
later **the way, the truth and the life***

*and claimed that he had come to bring **life, abundant life,
eternal life***

So for those with eyes to see there are plenty of teasing insights about Jesus and life. But still no-one was really expecting Jesus to come back to life ...

... which is why Mary returned to the tomb to weep once more. As the tears freely flowed, she looks into the tomb and has a vision of two angels who ask her why she is weeping.

She then turns around and sees Jesus but doesn't recognise him, a feature shared with several other resurrection appearances. Given that Jesus was buried in a **garden**, Mary supposes that Jesus is the **gardener** and requests that if he has moved the body to please tell her so that she can go and fetch it.



Jesus then calls her name – **Mary!**

She knows that voice! It's the voice of Jesus. **Rabboni!**
Teacher!

And with the exchange of just two words she recognises Jesus, alive again and talking with her!

It's the same Jesus, but he's different. He says 'Don't hold onto me' ... which suggests their relationship will not go back to how it was before. Jesus won't go back to being an itinerant preacher and healing people.

Instead, Jesus is going back to his Father, returning to where he came from.

Now it's possible that what Mary saw was an **hallucination** of Jesus – a bereavement hallucination – where she saw and heard the voice of the person she was deeply grieving for. Such hallucinations are quite common, if not well understood.

Psychologists suggest it may be our brain expecting the presence of a loved one, which is more real to us than our perception of the world, especially when we are grieving.

In Mary's case, she is given a task – to go back to the disciples with a message from Jesus that he is alive and will be returning to God the Father.

So Mary becomes the first witness of the resurrected Jesus.

What adds credibility to Mary's story is that the early church continued to insist on the truth of Mary's role – her story is repeated in each of the four Gospels. If the disciples had wanted to invent the story of Jesus being raised, then one wonders why the first witness would be a woman, and a woman with a dubious history. So in many ways Mary's story seems unlikely and therefore **more likely** to be true.

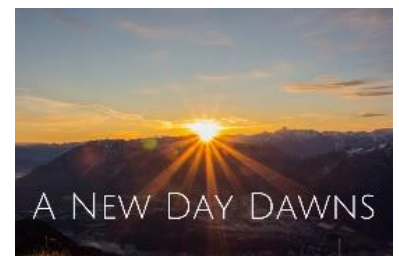
But what does this day mean for us, so many centuries later?

I would argue that if Jesus had not risen from the dead, there would be **no church**. Jesus would have faded into obscurity and there would have been **no Christian movement** ... and we would probably live in a very different world that is even more tribal and uncaring than we see today.

So Easter is the most important day of the year for Christians.

It is like a **new day dawning**. If our worst thoughts and anxieties afflict us at night, then they often seem more manageable when the new light of day dawns.

The movement from darkness to light is palpable in the Easter story.



Jesus came to bring light and the message of Easter is that his light was not extinguished at the cross but continues to shine in the world. If Good Friday appeared to be all darkness and despair, then Easter says there is light and hope.



The new life of Jesus is like a **new creation**.

While we may see this in individual terms – what it will mean for my individual future – Jesus always thought in terms of a new **community** that shared love and forgiveness and grace.

The death of Jesus on Good Friday threatened to bring all this crashing down. Perhaps it was all just a **fantasy** that the world could be different and kinder and more loving ... perhaps Jesus' vision was naïve and impossible ... that communities could not live out his alternative vision.

The resurrection says that that this **new creation** – this new way to relate to one

another – to love one another – is not only possible but is indeed God’s way. So much of our world is depressing or life-denying, but the message of Easter is that Jesus has opened a new way that brings hope and peace and joy.

It also brings **a new way to relate to God**. Throughout his ministry and especially in the Gospel of John, Jesus refers to God as **Father** or **my Father**. In his long teaching at the Last Supper as recounted in John’s Gospel – which we will explore in the next few weeks – Jesus suggests it is actually helpful if he goes away because then God will send the Holy Spirit, who will bring Jesus’ presence to us.

The Spirit will also draw believers into the same sort of deep and intimate relationship with God that Jesus himself enjoyed. We will live ‘**in Jesus**’ just as Jesus lives ‘**in the Father**’ and God will live in us. This relationship will not be ended by death.

We will experience life as God’s children, known and **called by name** – as Mary was – and **loved by God**. God will come to us and make his home among us and within us. All this is possible because Jesus has risen and returned to the Father, whom he now calls my Father and **your Father**, my God and **your God**.

In Matthew’s Gospel, this new way of relating to Jesus and to God is summed up in Jesus’ statement that ‘I will be with you always’. This idea is picked up in the Moderator’s Easter message that we will listen to now.



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