

**Prayer**

Living Lord, on this brightest of days, you returned, came back from that great cavern that separates life from death. You didn't leave humanity alone, but returned to embrace us and bring us life.

But death still plagues us, Lord of Life. We pray on behalf of our brothers and sisters still caught in the ugliness of war, in the pain of civil strife, in circumstances of debilitating poverty and in days of mourning for some loved one who has been lost to death.

Resurrected Lord, bring us your healing power, lead us towards life. Heal our doubts, show yourself to us, and lead us this day from our death towards your life. Amen.

**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. 2 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!'

3 So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. 4 Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. 5 He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. 6 Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, 7 as well as the cloth that had been wrapped round Jesus' head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen. 8 Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. 9 (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.) 10 Then the disciples went back to where they were staying.

11 Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb 12 and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.

13 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.' 14 At this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realise that it was Jesus.

15 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.'

16 Jesus said to her, 'Mary.'

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

17 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.'"

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

## I The empty Tomb

This then was the first Easter morning, lots of exercise, and maybe even a little competition between Peter and 'the other disciple'. The 'other disciple' could be a code word for John but may not be. **Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter.** This other disciple must have been the Nick Willis of his time and he had the stronger finish. Mary Magdalene, however, was there even before the lads. To her horror the tomb was empty. It was still dark; and in the light of the tremendous pressure the disciples must have felt, 'the other disciple' was only prepared to peer into the tomb from the outside.

However Peter boldly moved right in. And what did he see – the linen shroud and the cloth that had been around Jesus' head? That was it. 'The other disciple' plucked up courage and came in. He looked. He saw. 'He believed,' says our text. Believed! What did he believe? Not that Jesus was raised from death. Nobody thought that – YET! The text goes on to explain that they didn't as yet know anything about resurrection.

On the one hand the use of believe does suggest he believed something – bit like us really. There are many Christians who 'believe' Jesus is alive, but it doesn't touch their lives. In fact many live as though he isn't. We sing *'I'm alive; I'm alive because he lives'* and then live as if it's of no consequence. The other disciple's first response isn't life-changing for him.

On the other hand, having seen and having believed that Jesus was dead; that Jesus' body had now been stolen from the tomb, these two men went on their way and probably had breakfast (20:10) **Then the disciples went back to where they were staying.**

'It was good while it lasted, wasn't it?' they talked on their way back.

'I'll never forget that time with Jesus at the wedding, where was it? Oh yes, Cana, where he turned the water into wine. You know something; we ought to write this stuff down so we don't forget it.'

'John's good with words, maybe he'll do it.'

They came. They saw. They went home. Jesus was dead, the reality of that was now sinking in.

As an aside, often the most vivid and painful memory of grief is when we return home. Know what I mean? The funeral's over. Friends and family depart, leaving us with too much food, and empty casserole dishes to return.

Then it's quiet. And you're at home; it's so quiet. You see the chair at the table where they sat. You need only one now. Oh no, there's her knitting bag/his SKY remote. Put that away. The grocery list is in her handwriting; the list of friends he was going duck-shooting with is by the phone; the folded linen. It's painful - maybe that's how the disciples felt.

## II Jesus appears to Mary

Mary stood outside the tomb weeping. She'd come before Peter and the other disciple and curiously, she stayed, fixed in her grief, weeping at this final outrage. Where have they taken the body of Jesus? Where can she find it?

And that's a big part of loving - we don't love some disembodied 'humanity.' We love those eyes, those hands; that touch. Edgar Jackson in a study of grief and bereavement says that one of the most important experiences in the grief process is viewing the body, that moment when the bereaved look in the coffin and know – the loved one is dead.

Mary wanted that certainty, she wanted to know. The sight of the stone rolled away, the folded cloths, the absence of Jesus' body, didn't move Mary to thoughts of resurrection.

She, like Peter, knew of only one possibility: they've taken away my Lord and I don't know where they've laid him.

Her logic is faultless. Dead bodies don't simply disappear. Someone has to move them. The world is a place of cause and effect. We live by stable laws. Things happen the way they've always happened - all science, all human reasoning and all perception is based on the pervasiveness of the familiar. Only that which has occurred before can occur now. Find the body Mary, wherever it may be, then get on with your grieving. Only then will you be able to go home, get back to life, business as usual. How's Mary going to find Jesus?

How are we going to find Jesus?

No body? Where's the body? 'They've taken away my Lord and I don't know where to find him.' 'The other disciple,' looks in the tomb, sees the evidence of a robbery, and believes.

Along with Peter he goes back home. It hasn't sunk in! Mary, slower on the uptake, sees the same evidence but stands there, befuddled about what to think. 'I don't know where to find Jesus.'

Then she hears her name, 'Mary.'

Mary struggles to make sense of it all. She takes the one who speaks to be the gardener. Grasping him, she pleads, **'tell me where you have put him, and I will get him.'**(20:15). She wants Jesus' body that she might do the proper, conventional, respectful thing for it.

**'Mary!'**

**'Teacher!'**

The illogical, unthinkable, impossible, unnatural, and incredible breaks in. The one certified as dead — she saw the napkin, the linen cloth.

**'Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father'** (20:17) he says. Mary's perfectly logical and understandably natural need to pursue Jesus' body hasn't yet room for the miracle that's happened. The voice of Jesus has called to her, across the abyss of death, thrown a line to her across the cavernous expanse between her little logic and the power of God to work wonders. Like the voice that shatters glass, Jesus' voice shatters Mary's world, calls her forward to a new world, indeed a new future.

Mary's now able to hear properly, to see, to tell the others, **'I have seen the Lord'** (vs. 18). She's moved beyond her preoccupation with the corpse to an encounter with Jesus! He's alive. Her cause-effect logic is replaced by the larger logic called faith. She's been encountered, not by the dead Jesus she thought she would see, but by the living Lord who's on the move and won't be held by our little logic.

Now there are at least two ways to think about things: two ways of understanding:

One is when you're maybe working on a tough maths problem and after much effort you say, 'I got it!'

The other way is, say, when you read a great book or go to a great film, and it changes you, lays hold of you to the very depths and you emerge changed. In that case, you don't say, 'I got it!' No. It gets you.

We, the dying as we are, have come here today like Mary to find Jesus, to search for him using whatever means we have. But we don't 'find' Jesus. No. He calls us, shatters our petty little worlds, challenges and intrudes. He finds us.

And because he lives we can confidently proclaim, 'I'm alive, I'm alive because he lives.' **YES!**