

Sunday 31 March – Easter Day

Sermon by Anne-Marie Renshaw

An audio recording of the sermon will be available after the service at [Sermons \(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk\)](http://Sermons(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk)

Many years ago, I was asked to read the New Testament reading at a service in the chapel of King Alfred's College in Winchester. The reading came from the book of Revelation. I was handed a Bible and duly turned to the back of it, only to find that the whole of the Book of Revelation had been torn out. I will never know whether it had been removed by someone who didn't approve of it and didn't think it ought to be in the Bible at all or by someone who wanted to take it home for a read through but couldn't bring themselves to take the whole Bible.

The end of the Gospel according to Mark rather feels as if someone might have done the same thing: ripped out the last few pages. Because this is where the Gospel ends: Mary Magdalene, Mary and Salome go to Jesus' tomb, find that he is not there and: "They went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." That's it. That's the end.

It's hardly a satisfactory ending, so much so that two alternative endings have been written by somebody and added on to the end of Mark's narrative, early on in the history of the Christian church. One of these additional endings is very short. It reads:

"And all that had been commanded them they told briefly to those around Peter. And afterward Jesus himself sent out through them, from east to west, the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation."

Clearly, Mark did not write that. It isn't in his style at all and has obviously been written later on, once the church had begun to develop a theology of salvation centred on Jesus' death and resurrection.

The other, longer, ending briefly describes Jesus' appearances to Mary Magdalene, to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus and to the disciples in the upper room before mentioning Jesus' return to heaven and the disciples' mission to proclaim the good news. It looks as if it has been written by someone who had access to the other gospel accounts. There are

even alternative versions of this longer ending, one of which is rather odd and is included in the footnotes in modern Bibles rather than the main text.

We don't know why Mark chose to end his account where he did, or indeed, if that is where he did intend to end it. Maybe there is an ending that was lost early on. Or maybe he was interrupted and never had the opportunity to finish his great work. What we have does seem a strange way to end an account that he describes in the opening verse as "the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God".

But what if it had all ended there? What if the women had never said anything to anyone, because they were afraid? They didn't understand what had happened, who had removed the stone over the tomb, where Jesus' body had gone, who the young man they had seen might be or what was the meaning of his words. None of it made sense and they knew they might not be believed if they told what they had seen so they kept quiet and waited to see what would happen next.

What might have happened next? Surely, at some point, someone else would have gone to the tomb, but it might not have been Mary Magdalene who was the first to see the risen Lord. Peter and John might not have rushed there and seen for themselves that the tomb was empty, save for the neatly folded burial cloths. Surely, Jesus would still have appeared to the disciples on the Emmaus road and in the upper room that evening. News of the resurrection would still have crept out.

So what actually happened? Maybe the women didn't say anything at first, because of their fear, but then they changed their minds and decided they had to say something. Luke tells us the men didn't believe them anyway when they did speak up. Maybe Mary Magdalene went back to the tomb by herself later, unable to believe herself what she had seen.

The news of the resurrection was always going to get out one way or another. If death couldn't keep Jesus at bay, then the women's fear and hesitation wasn't going to derail God's plan. Once the news was out, it kept on spreading,. Gradually, more and more people came to know that Jesus' body was missing from the tomb and then that he had been seen, heard and touched. Over the next few years the news would continue to spread and what had started out with just twelve men in the region of the Sea of Galilee would become an unstoppable worldwide movement of people committed

to faith in the carpenter from Nazareth as none other than the incarnate Lord of all creation.

The disciples may not have believed the women at first, but millions of people have come to believe the words spoken by the mysterious young man in the tomb, that Jesus was not there because he had been raised.

They were looking for Jesus in the wrong place. He wasn't there. They were in the wrong place because they had not believed or understood what he had said to them about dying and rising again. Jesus was already going ahead of them to Galilee, always one step ahead of even his closest disciples. They thought the tomb would be the right place to find Jesus, but it wasn't. They would find Jesus, eventually, or rather, he would find them, but he would not stay with them physically for long. He would tell Mary Magdalene that she could not hold onto him. He would spend just forty more days with them before returning to the Father, leaving them with instructions to wait for the coming of the Spirit. They would then have to learn to look for him in new ways. They would not see him bodily again, but they would know his presence with them as they felt the power of the Spirit, as they saw how the Spirit transformed them into different people, as they began to experience the signs and wonders Jesus had told them they would be empowered to perform. They learned to look for Jesus everywhere they went and to find him everywhere they saw the Spirit at work in people's lives.

Where do we go to look for the risen Jesus? Probably, to a church, yes, but if we think we can only find him in church, then we haven't yet grasped the new reality that his disciples had to discover in the days after the resurrection. We, like them, will find Jesus wherever the Spirit is at work, wherever lives are being transformed by the Spirit working in people who are living out their faith in actions of love and service or who are searching for a deeper sense of connection and relatedness to God.

Yes, we may find Jesus here in church as we worship him, but we will also find Jesus on the streets of our villages, towns and cities, in the homeless shelter, the food bank, the hospital ward, the school classroom, the charity shop. And we may also catch glimpses of him on our television screens in the refugee camp, the humanitarian aid convoy, the emergency field hospital. Wherever there are people filled with the Spirit, living out Jesus' commandment to love one another, there Jesus is present.

And sometimes, where we find Jesus will be the place where we have reached our lowest ebb. The women went to the tomb in sorrow, grief and despair. They thought everything they had dared to hope for and believe in had come to an abrupt and violent end. They were expecting to leave the tomb after they had done what they had come to do, still in sorrow, grief and despair. Mark tells us they fled in fear and confusion. The joy would only come later. Sometimes it is when we are in the depths of sorrow, grief and despair, when we think that all is lost, that we find Jesus is already one step ahead of us, inviting us to look up through our tears and recognise his presence.

In the middle of the Eucharistic prayer, we use the words, “Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.” Notice the difference in the tense of the verb: Christ has died – a one-off event that happened at a particular point in time – but Christ is risen, not has risen. Christ is still risen. It was an event in time, but an event that has lasting consequences. Jesus has not died again. He remains risen from the dead. He is still present with us, through the Spirit. He is still active in our world through the disciples whom he still calls to follow. If we want to find him, then, like the women of Jerusalem, we just need to look in the right place.