

Sunday 5 April – Easter Day

Sermon by Christine Newmarch

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

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

*May I speak in the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.*

Well, Happy Easter, everyone. Today really is the happiest day and the most important celebration for Christians. It is the light at the end of the long tunnel of Lent.

This morning's gospel reading, John's account of Easter Day, is I find the most moving of the four accounts, which can be difficult to read aloud.

Early in the morning after the Sabbath, John tells us that Mary Magdalene went to visit the tomb. It seems she was alone, and empty handed, visiting as an act of mourning and love.

It is remarkable that in Roman-occupied Jerusalem she was able to do this, apparently unaccompanied, unchallenged and with her love for Jesus outweighing any fear she may have had.

This would not be advisable in modern-day Jerusalem. Although agreement has been reached with the Israeli authorities to allow Easter celebrations to take place at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the war has added to the difficulties generally experienced by Christians in Jerusalem, so let us rejoice that Mary Magdalene was able to walk across the city to Jesus' tomb.

Mary found the tomb open, and the body gone. This was not what she was expecting. In shock and anguish, she rushed back to Simon Peter, and the other disciple, the disciple whom Jesus loved, the disciple who does not name himself, but whom we know as John.

The little details of the two men running, with John outrunning Peter, John looking into the tomb, but Peter catching up and running in with his customary impetuosity, all show the humanity and vulnerability we share in unexpected situations. The little details point to the truth of the

account, and John indeed writes at the end of his gospel that his testimony is true.

Despite all Jesus' teaching, despite the empty tomb, despite the linen wrappings lying there and the cloth which had been on Jesus' head in a separate place, Peter, John and Mary did not understand what they were seeing.

A grave robber would not have left the linen cloth or head wrapping.

The men returned home, perhaps to the upper room where they had shared that last special Passover meal with Jesus, but by then Mary had returned, and stayed weeping. In time, she found it in herself to stoop down and look into the tomb, and was rewarded by seeing not one, but two angels in white sitting where Jesus' body had been.

Had they been there all along? Had Peter and John simply not seen them, or had they just appeared? We cannot say, but they were real. They asked Mary why she was weeping, the very same question Jesus asked her a moment later.

Mary recognised Jesus as he spoke her name. It was a brief, but deeply personal encounter. At his bidding, Mary returned to the disciples announcing 'I have seen the Lord!'

Mary Magdalene, so often and unfairly maligned in popular culture, is also and rightly known as the Apostle to the Apostles. Her testimony is crucial to the whole Christian faith.

Of course, nobody saw Jesus rise from the dead. It was a private moment in the cool of the rock-hewn tomb.

Everything we have learnt about the resurrection comes through all the signs that it occurred. Not only the empty tomb, this account and the Easter morning experiences in the other gospels, but all the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus, and the change these wrought in his disciples.

One of my favourite children's books is this account of the Easter story, written and beautifully illustrated by Brian Wildsmith. It tells the story of Holy Week and Easter, the post resurrection appearances and the Jesus' ascension through the eyes of the little donkey who had carried Jesus into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday.

The little donkey saw Jesus clearing the temple, witnessed Jesus' agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, his arrest, trial and crucifixion. In the book,

the author imagines Joseph of Arimathea placing the body of Jesus on the back of the little donkey and he carried it to the tomb. On Easter morning the donkey saw the angels and the risen Jesus in the garden.

At the end of the book, after the little donkey has seen everything through innocent eyes, the disciples take him back to his home. The donkey stayed there for the rest of his life remembering the kind and good man he had carried on his back.

Donkeys live a long time of course, so he might also have witnessed the early years of the church, the times when Luke was noting the Acts of the Apostles, and when Paul was writing his letters to the churches including Colossae.

In the story book it is the kindness of Jesus rather than all the horrors which he had witnessed which the little donkey remembered. This is what we should remember too. It was Jesus' kindness, his generosity of spirit, his faithfulness to his calling which enabled him to sacrifice himself for us and to rise again in triumph over sin and death.

Peter tells this story in his speech at the house of Cornelius, and how this triumph is for all people.

Paul's letter to the Colossians reminds them and us of our baptismal duty to set our minds on heavenly things rather than earthly things.

This can be so difficult in this troubled world. I weep at the news, and it is only right to pray for the needs of the whole world, to pray for peace and reconciliation for all, but today we are risen with Christ, Easter people. Let us rejoice that Jesus' light shines in the darkness, and like the little donkey, we should remember all that is good about our Lord and Saviour. Amen.

Alleluia! Christ is risen.

He is risen indeed. Alleluia!