

From sight to faith

A sermon preached by Dr Tony Lemon, Lay Preacher, on Easter Sunday, 5 April 2015 in St Peter's Wolvercote. **Reading: John 20, 8** *Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and he believed;*

Today we celebrate the end of the conflict between Light and Darkness and the triumph of love. For a brief period up to and on the first Good Friday darkness seemed to prevail: as Jesus said to those who came to arrest him in dark of night, 'But this is your hour, and the power of darkness'. The true triumph of love was on Good Friday itself, when the victory was won and Jesus declared 'It is finished'. But it would have been a hollow victory if it had ended there. What remained was to gather in the fruits, and it is the beginning of this process which we celebrate today.

The story of this process in St. John's Gospel is told with vivid details which strongly suggest its authenticity. It is a story of *the passage from sight to faith*, the culmination of the problem of the relationship of seeing and believing which is a prominent theme in John's Gospel from the Prologue itself: 'the Word became flesh and lived among us and we have seen his glory'. John, the beloved disciple, believes when he sees the grave-clothes; Mary Magdalene believes when she hears a familiar voice say her name; most of the apostles when they see the Lord's wounds; and Thomas when he sees those wounds and is invited to feel them. But all these appearances are accompanied by an emphasis on the importance of faith without seeing, of a faith which will endure when Jesus has physically departed, echoing what he said in the farewell discourses: only when he leaves the disciples can the Holy Spirit come to them, to be their strength and guide, the root of their faith when they can no longer see and experience the physical presence of Jesus with them. It is John, the beloved disciple, who is the first to come to faith in this sense. The impulsive Peter, who is clearly still looked upon as the leader of the disciples despite his denial of Jesus, is the first to enter the empty tomb and see the linen grave-clothes and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, as if they had fallen from Jesus' risen body. But Peter doesn't see the significance of this. John, who follows him into the tomb, does: 'he saw and he believed.' Of course John already had some faith: he believed that Jesus was the Messiah and that God had sent him. But this was different: John was the first person to grasp the truth, to recognise and believe in the Resurrection.

It was Mary Magdalene who was the first person to see the Risen Lord. Through her tears, and as she looked down at the tomb, she didn't recognise him, until he uttered her name. When she did, Jesus tells her not to hold on to him. He does not want her to cling too closely to his physical form, because she needs to learn to trust and serve when she can no longer cling to him. This is a message for all who would follow him: our devotion is not to hold us by the empty tomb, but to follow him in faith, when we cannot see. This is a key theme in St. John's Gospel, which shows how the need for

seeing Jesus during the days of his earthly ministry is linked with the impossibility of seeing him today – to explain the passage from belief with sight to belief without sight.

It is at this point that Jesus tells Mary ‘go to my brothers and say to them “I’m going to my father and your father – to my God and your God”’. There is a sudden and critical change of language here. Hitherto Jesus has spoken of ‘the Father’ or ‘my Father’, and he has called his followers ‘disciples’, ‘servants’ or friends’. Now the relationship has changed: they are brothers, and share the same father and the same God. The disciples are welcomed to a new world where they can know God the way Jesus knew God. In this way they have truly gathered in the fruits of Jesus’ victory.

But their task is just beginning. Had they simply rejoiced in personal transformation, this would have been tantamount to keeping their eyes on the empty tomb. As Jesus had told Andrew and Philip before the Passover Festival, ‘unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit’ (John, 12 24). In the strength of their newfound faith the disciples must lift up their eyes and go out into the world, bringing the good news to the ends of the earth. We have an early snapshot of this process in today’s reading from Acts, when the message brings the Spirit to Gentiles, and to Romans. Caesarea is hardly ‘the ends of the earth’, but from here it was only a short step culturally to the rest of the known world. Jesus’ seemingly unrealistic faith in a small band of flawed disciples was beginning to be vindicated. *How utterly extraordinary* that such small beginnings should explain our presence here today, along with some two billion Christians throughout the world, as we affirm and rejoice in his resurrection, acknowledging its significance for all humankind.