

Sermon for Easter Day

A sermon preached by *the Revd Dr Rob Gilbert* at St Peter's, Wolvercote, at the 10.00am Easter Day Service on Sunday 8th April 2012

Acts 10:34-43; John 20:1-18

Our first reading today reported a speech given by Peter in the house of a Roman centurion in Caesarea. The central theme of what Peter had to say is the idea of *witnessing*. He is standing before his hearers as a witness to Jesus's ministry during his life, and as a witness to his death and to his resurrection. Peter is saying: I followed him, I heard him teach and saw him heal, and he ate and drank with me after he had risen from the dead. But Peter isn't just witnessing by what he says. The fact he is there in Caesarea, speaking in this way, is in itself a witness to the resurrection.

What I mean is this: Peter was the leader among the disciples, the one Jesus called his 'rock', but even before Jesus had been killed Peter denied him three times. By the time he was crucified, Peter was nowhere to be seen – Jesus' mother was at the foot of the cross, and the Beloved Disciple, but not Peter. Even Peter's response to Jesus' resurrection in today's Gospel seems to be to run away. When Peter and the Beloved Disciple rush to the tomb to check out Mary Magdalene's report that the body has been stolen, they find things as she told them: as the Gospel says, they believed her report that the body had gone. But their response is to return to the relative safety of home. To try and return to their old lives, the lives they led before they met Jesus.

The evidence is, the death of Jesus caused the disciples to hide away. They had seen their leader tortured to death, so his mission seemed to them to have failed completely. As a result, the transformation Peter has undergone to equip him to stand up and say what we heard reported today – that all the prophets testify about Jesus and that he rose from the dead – is almost unbelievable. Indeed, we wouldn't believe it if the evidence wasn't so plainly in front of us.

As I say, the evidence is found in the transformation of Peter's life and of the lives of all the apostles, all those who bore personal witness to the resurrection. Perhaps the most potent examples are the lives of Peter and of Paul. Paul's own claim to be an apostle rests on the fact he met the risen Jesus on the Damascus road. The church today would not exist if apostles like Peter and Paul had not had their understanding totally transformed by the resurrection. Their lives were so transformed that, rather than hiding away and looking for safety, Peter and Paul and the other apostles were willing to be killed rather than stop witnessing to the rising of Jesus from the dead.

So, the apostles witnessed to their contemporaries and they witness to us, through what they say but more importantly by the way their lives are transformed. But Mary Magdalene was herself a witness to the disciples: it was she who first recognised the risen Jesus and reported his resurrection to them. That is why she is called the apostle to the apostles. There is however a difference between her witnessing and theirs, because Mary did not desert Jesus. She *was* at the foot of the cross along with Jesus' mother and the Beloved Disciple. And although Jesus has been buried she still wants to stay close to him, so she comes to the garden while it is still dark, to mourn for Jesus. I wonder if this refusal to give up on Jesus the way Peter had is because Mary's own life has itself already been changed in a fundamental way before the resurrection itself? She has started an inner transformation already – the Gospel says, she had seven devils cast out of her – so she *knows*, somehow, deep inside, that Jesus stood for something real and true, something you don't give up on. It seems this was something the other apostles had to be shown, but Mary knows it for herself.

You could say that, even though Mary had not *yet* seen, she still believed. She already saw the world in a fundamentally different way from the other disciples. The reward for her belief was to be the first person to greet the risen Jesus, and to help the other apostles to begin their own transformations in the knowledge of Easter.

The transformation of the apostles that occurred due to the resurrection didn't just affect them, of course. Soon it was drawing people to follow Jesus who had not known him personally during his life. Within just a few years the church was spread throughout the known world and men and women were confidently proclaiming that Jesus Christ is the image of God, the first born from the dead. And so to today, where we all in this church are also witnesses to Jesus' resurrection. We share the same faith as Mary Magdalene, Peter and the other apostles – we share in the effect of their transformation, echoing down the centuries, and we have been transformed by the resurrection as well. We all stand in an unbroken line of witness from the first Easter onwards.

I hope that you can see in your own lives what a difference this makes. Like the apostles, we find ourselves in a secular world and with a message to preach that many around us find unacceptable. But the resurrection enables us to see a new significance and meaning to things, and how all the laws in the world – whether the laws of the state or the laws of nature – are under one overarching law of love. We do not run away from the difficulty of looking the world directly in the face, and seeing it for itself – seeing it for its joys and beauty and also for its horrors. The resurrection transformation enables us to celebrate what is good as really, truly good, even while we mourn profoundly the evil in the world. That is, the resurrection transformation commits us to search for total honesty. We also know how people are given almost unbelievable capacities for forgiveness by their resurrection faith. And on the other side, the resurrection also gives the strength to withstand terrible things, enabling women and men to show almost unbelievable creativity. Like the apostle's faith these things are only believable because the evidence is so plainly all around us.

Amen.