

John 20:1-18

For me, the Gospel reading we have just heard is perhaps the most beautiful and evocative passage in the entire Bible.

Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb to find it empty; she sits despairingly weeping beside it, until she hears the voice of Christ calling her name.

Mary and the other disciples have been through a period of utter devastation. They have experienced the betrayal, arrest and execution of the person they believed had come to save them and Israel from the oppression of the Romans; someone in whom they could see something of God and whom they believed to be the long-awaited Messiah, the Chosen One of God.

For a long night on Thursday they no doubt kept Vigil, as we did here at St Mary Abbots, waiting in fear to hear news of what had happened to Jesus after his arrest, and then, in the morning, hear that he had been taken for judgement, first to Pilate and then to Herod, and then back to Pilate. Perhaps they could hear the crowds shouting for his crucifixion. And then they stood at the feet of the Cross, watching the horrific death of the man they loved before their very eyes, unable to help or to comfort him, only to experience from “far off” the sight of his suffering.

When Jesus was taken hurriedly down from the Cross as the Sabbath approached, Mary and the women among them were prevented by the onset of the Sabbath from doing what women traditionally did in their culture – washing and anointing the body, preparing it for burial, and they had to watch again as Jesus was laid in the tomb of a sympathetic man he barely knew. From Friday until the end of the Sabbath they would have been trapped in their homes, prevented from going out both by the rules of the Sabbath and by their fear that they would be recognized and perhaps attacked as supporters of the man who had been condemned.

And finally, when Mary Magdalene dares to leave the house, to vent her grief and trauma at the place where Jesus has been laid, she finds the tomb bare and empty, the body gone and even her opportunity to mourn appropriately seemingly snatched away by unseen hands.

In the way so many of us do when faced with inexplicable events, she blames faceless individuals, ““They” have taken him away, and I do not know where “they” have laid him...” It isn’t clear who she is thinking of here, if she is even able to think clearly enough – does she rapidly imagine the body being taken away by rough soldiers, by members of the incited mob, by rival disciples or the man who apparently so kindly lent his own tomb?

She is completely distraught, worn out by sleepless nights, by moments of terror and adrenalin, by overwhelming sadness and loss.

Perhaps this year, more of us can identify with Mary Magdalene than is usual on Easter Day.

This has been a year of loss, of grief, of isolation; a year when we have been unable to comfort and say goodbye to those we loved, those taken from us too soon, too young, people from our own families, our community and our nation, amongst those grim statistics read out day after day on the news.

It has been a year of trauma, uncertainty and high stress, and we too are completely exhausted by isolation and loneliness, the stresses of home schooling, working from home with shaky technology and keeping our friends and families safe whilst unable to touch them or see them in person. Perhaps like Mary Magdalene, we feel we need time to pause, to re-assess, to speak the grief which we have been unable to show and yet time and again we have been denied these possibilities.

When Mary senses that there is someone behind her, she doesn't even look properly at him, maybe blinded by tears or simply unwilling or unable to focus on yet another person invading her grief, and she fails to recognize Jesus, until she hears him speaking her name.

Then, at last, her heart and her senses are assailed by the extraordinary moment of recognition that in spite of everything, Christ is with her, he loves her and he calls her by name...

Things are not the same, though – when she reaches out to him, Jesus tells her, “Do not hold on to me”. The traditional Latin translation, “Noli me tangere” – do not touch me – evokes the sense that he is in some way distant, but the original Greek is closer to the translation we have just heard, that Mary should not try to hang on to him, because in the ‘new normal’, Christ will ascend back to his place in heaven and she will no longer have his physical presence with her on earth.

Yet she has seen him and known that he will always be with her, and in her excitement, she announces to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”.

Today we celebrate with Mary Magdalene, the knowledge that Christ is risen, and in that rising, he brings us the certainty of hope, hope in this life, but even more, hope that if we trust in him, we shall one day rise with him in glory – together with the hundreds of thousands of people who have died this year across the world.

We can create a new normal in which we walk day by day in the knowledge that if we listen, we too will hear Christ calling our name and reassuring us that he loves us and will always be with us.

The glory of Christ's Resurrection is the climax of the Christian year; it is the foundation of our faith. In spite of our grief and our exhaustion, it offers us the possibility of hope and joy in a new normal in which we can continue to proclaim, “We are an Easter people, and Alleluia is our song.”

Our Alleluias give praise to God, they strengthen and encourage us in hope, and they can offer hope to a grieving and stricken world and draw others to the brightness of Christ's glory.

Alleluia, Christ is risen! He is risen indeed, Alleluia”. **Amen.**