

Sunday 16 April 2006: Easter Day

Easter Sunday Sermon

Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'.

In a Clergy Staff meeting very early in my time here someone commented 'of course we do Good Friday at St Martin's much better than we do Easter. Because we do Good Friday all of the time.' St Martin's is a church which lives with reality, lives with the mess of our lives and our world, lives with human experience as it is for some people much of the time and for most of us some of the time – painful, hard, uncompromising.

So in this place we sit with the marginalised and the depressed as they wander in during the week and find a space where they will be taken seriously, we open our doors to people whose homes are no longer a place where they can feasibly live, we are in real relationship with places where generations are decimated by the impact of Aids, we take seriously what happens to the people of Iraq. We do Good Friday all of the time.

But what do we offer of Easter? The writer Rubem Alves said 'Hope is hearing the melody of the future. Faith is to dance to it.' What offer of dancing do we make?

I'm not quite dancing this Easter morning, and there will be many of you who aren't either. I'm not sufficiently certain of the melody of what's beyond this life to abandon myself to it. And that's simply because it's the first Easter since my father fell to his death from a mountain in the Lake District, and therefore the first on which I've been unable to picture where someone I deeply love actually is. I'm by no means alone in this.

Of course even without the resurrection the Gospel story is captivating - from its declaration that 'In the beginning was the Word' right up to Calvary. It teaches us about God manifest in creation, about fullness of life in all of its aspects, about the wonder of human community and the fertile possibilities when life is lived at peace with one another and with God. All of that holds without Easter.

But in the end, when push comes to shove, if on this Easter Day heaven is not – as our early morning liturgy told us - wedded to earth, fused by love and glory, there is something singularly lacking in the story's end.

I know the ending I want - I want Isaiah's mountain-top feast, the rich food, the well-aged wines strained clear. I want to know in my body that death has been swallowed up for ever, and that the God whom I have worshipped all of my life will wipe the tears from the eyes of all who mourn. I want to know, with the conviction of Peter, that God raised Jesus on the third day. I want to see the mortician's linen wrappings thrown to the side because he has no more need of them. And I want that to be true of everyone we have all known and loved and held and belonged to, whom we can no longer talk with or touch.

Perhaps living with a 4 year old and her questions, her insistence upon answers that she can turn around in her mind and translate into something concrete, has awoken my own need for certainty. I don't need quite such fine detail as she does 'Mummy does everyone lie down when they die and go to heaven?' – but I know why she needs to know.

David Monteith, previously of the clergy team here, sent me a poem this week about Michelangelo's *Rondanini Pieta*. I now know that this is a sculpture of Mary the mother of Christ supporting the body of her dead son from behind in a kind of slumped standing position – knees buckling as he, a dead weight, blends with her, and she becomes an exquisite combination of fragility and strength. It's an unfinished piece, and one website told me: 'The non-finished work appears to embody the value of a fragmented idea, which the author was not able (or did not want) to express unless by broken phrases ...'

There are things that only broken phrases will express. In that case, the anguish of Mary holding her son in death. In our case, three nights further down the line of the story, the hope of resurrection. How can we say or describe it? Words slip through our fingers like sand.

The poem about the sculpture is by David Scott: *It is all still being made/ And it is all just breaking up./He is being carried, and she/Is carrying him now. He is bearing up,/And now is carrying her/In such an awkward verticality:/Both so tired, so sad. His work/Is done: hers, now over, begins again./The only hope lies in the spring of/Knees, which are broken, but ready/For resurrection./The whole world/Is on his back, crying 'now!'*

We are on his back, crying 'now!' We desperately need to know that he can do it. That it's for real. That whatever the death is that we experience in the midst of our life – whether it is lack of something, loss of someone, brokenness of spirit, unbearable fragility of heart – because of the death we experience now and the death we will all come to in the end, our need is to know that Christ can transform it and be raised – because if he can so can we.

'Hope is hearing the melody of the future. Faith is to dance to it.' Perhaps St Martin's is better at doing Good Friday than Easter, but then Easter is so much harder to do. We don't know how to describe the offer, the reality of something that is so hard to understand and to touch, something in which we invest such hope. As a friend said to me only this morning, our faith may be secure, but on these things it might not be certain.

And yet on this Easter Day we offer you what we hope is a melody of certainty that sings with the notes of eternity. We offer you, we all offer one another, our belief that one day, in spite of our broken knees, we will be able to dance to that music.

And for what it's worth I offer you the truth of my security and my uncertainty – and my longing to know that eternity is a time and a place that will ultimately enfold us all in the fullness of its Sabbath. I offer you my picture of God as creator, redeemer, friend, fell-walker, flamenco-dancer, strengthener of broken bones, and inventor of Easter. I offer you my hope in the sacrificial, risk-taking spring of those shattered knees, and I pray that as we cling to his back crying 'now', we will know the tensing of muscle and sinew as he prepares to carry the whole of Creation into the swirling pattern of the dance.

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