

Sermon for Easter Day 2019

King's College Chapel

Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

And then she disappears from the story, at least by name. The gospel writer John says nothing of the disciples' reaction to her. Mark and Luke tell us they are incredulous (literally so). Many people, some of them very fine writers, have imagined what happened to Mary Magdalene. There are traditions, pious traditions, but without the staying power of the traditions about Mary, Jesus' mother.

We can let our imaginations work, though. I can imagine her going back to the tomb-garden. It might even be to say, 'I've done it, I've told them.' Maybe now at last she might hang onto Jesus. But, of course, he is gone. The tomb is still empty of its body, the garden of its gardener. Does her conviction remain intact? Has all that really happened, that dawn encounter with the man who looked nothing like Jesus and yet could have been no-one else?

Perhaps her memory and her understanding are utterly undisturbed. Perhaps the risen Son gave her that beneath the rising sun, a knowledge burned into her heart. Or perhaps she is jangled by the scornful scepticism of the disciples, by the Jesuslessness of that scrabbly ground under the burning midday sun; and so sits on the redundant stone, disconsolate, agonising.

At some point though, I want to believe, whether early or late, she leaps onto the stone and sings out:

i thank You God for most this amazing
day:for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes
(i who have died am alive again today,
and this is the sun's birthday; this is the birth
day of life and of love and wings: and of the gay
great happening illimitably earth)
how should tasting touching hearing seeing
breathing any—lifted from the no
of all nothing—human merely being
doubt unimaginable You?
(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)

Those are the words of a twentieth-century poet, but they could also be the words of one of Jesus' most faithful friends: words of joy and of the glimmerings of understanding.

That poem, which is by e e cummings, has both the unfettered joy of Easter and some serious theological content. The joy is real, it is certainly unfettered – and so it should be. And it is not without foundation. There is meaning and reality in what Easter is about. Without that the joy is short-lived, the stuff of shallow soil.

The real joy of Easter is not just the joy of a happy ending: 'he's alive!' Still, we can enjoy the culmination of the story: it helps to immerse ourselves in the reality of the very story. The whole sweep of the narrative from Palm Sunday to Easter Day is intensely engaging. If we live through it, our own passion and faith are fed.

It's not even just the joy of a happy *beginning*, although that is a bit closer: a new age is indeed inaugurated in Christ's death and resurrection.

So what do the death and resurrection mean? There is some very real, but very mysterious meaning, which underpin the joy. It is bound to involve mystery, because God is involved; and he is not to be constrained by human words and reasoning. But there *is* meaning, or a constellation of meanings, which make for a joy that should utterly redefine our lives.

This is not about laughing and smiling constantly. It is more about coming to know that God will always lift us 'from the no of all nothing', as cummings puts it. As Jesus was lifted up on the cross, then lifted out of the darkness of death, so his arms reach out to us to lift us up too. And not just once, but constantly. He is there for us in the ordinariness of our being merely human: and so in our tasting, touching, hearing, seeing and even simply breathing being we can always overleap doubt and anxiety, and turn back to the unimaginably loving, unimaginably present God...

... because God thought that being a tasting, touching, breathing mere human being was so beautiful that he became one. He got inside the mess of being merely human, because he loves us. And even when the worst of human weakness seemed to overwhelm him with their envy, hatred and murderous fear, he did not resist. He bowed before their homicidal rancour, paused in death, and then threw off the shackles of his confinement in the tomb.

His death and his rising are one great act, one great move. In that Jesus frees us from all that is death-dealing in our own lives. Envy, hatred, anger and all the other things we might suffer, or indeed inflict, do not disappear. But they can never have the last word, never prevail. This is the ultimate expression of grace; this is why we call grace amazing.

When I said there was a constellation of meanings to this, I was not exaggerating. The two millennia since Jesus' death and resurrection have seen millions of words written, spoken and thought about what they meant and mean. Those of us who call ourselves Christian must have some working hypotheses, at least, because that death and resurrection lie at the heart of any kind of Christian commitment. But we should say what we believe humbly and generously. And we should let our beliefs commend themselves in how we live.

We might learn from e e cummings. We *should* not doubt, but the one we should not doubt is unimaginable. Here is paradox, always the best medicine for a doctrinal headache. In the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus is the medicine for a much bigger headache, which is to say 'human merely being'.

Let me leave you with a final thought. If we want to understand Jesus' death and resurrection as good news, as gospel, we shouldn't just look to what apostles and preachers and theologians have said since. We should keep going back to his life and teaching. He was already telling us what the good news is long before he sealed it in his death and rising. It's good news for the poor, the captive, the blind, the oppressed. So, to hark back to e e cummings one last time: let us awaken our ears and open our eyes to the poverty, the captivity, the blindness and the oppression. It is all around us, and it is *in* all of us, and the good news is that none of it will prevail, in the end.

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day

Andrew Hammond
Easter 2019