

4 April 2021

**On the First Day (John 20. 1-18)**

*Easter Sunday*

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‘And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time’ (T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*)

Many of you will know that John’s account of Jesus’ meaning deliberately references the biblical myth of Creation, as told in the book of Genesis. That story kicks off as follows: ‘In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep. Then God said, “Let there be light”. Compare this to the opening words of John’s gospel: ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God. He was in the beginning with God ... What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it’.

Genesis continues: ‘And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day’. So now hear again the opening words of John’s resurrection narrative. ‘*Early* on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb’. As if the light of the world has not yet dawned or has somehow been eclipsed, and the earth (at least for Mary) has become a formless, meaningless void. And if you think that’s stretching the allusion a bit, listen to how John depicts Jesus’ resurrection appearance to the male disciples at the end of this same day. ‘When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week ... Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you”’. Do you hear the echo? There was evening and there was morning, the first day.

John's recapitulation of the Creation narrative goes on. In Genesis, when God creates the first human being, the first man, God places him in a garden. According to John, funnily enough, there just happened to be a garden 'in the place' where Jesus was crucified and 'in the garden' (the phrase is repeated), there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. This is where Jesus' body is placed – the newness of this sepulchre was fitting, says Calvin, since Jesus will be the firstborn from the dead, the firstborn of the new creation. Unsurprisingly, in this setting, Mary Magdalene is rendered as the new Eve. Which is why, when she's spoken to by angels and then by Jesus, she is addressed each time simply as 'Woman', and only later by her personal name.

Now this might seem odd, since, as those of you who were here on Friday will recall, Jesus on the cross addressed his mother Mary in exactly the same way. 'Woman, here is your son'. I said this was because *she* was the new Eve. But how can Mary his mother and Mary his friend both be considered (symbolically speaking) the new Eve in this new creation? Isn't this all getting a bit convoluted, if not kind of weird? Well, I wonder if what the gospel is saying is just that *everyone* who receives their identity anew through relationship with Jesus, everyone whose life is coming to be sourced where his is sourced in God, is going to be remade, recreated. They're going to be enabled to be who they were created to be from the beginning, and so to be generative of renewed human relations, a new humanity.

Jesus says to Mary Magdalene, 'Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?' She supposes him to be the gardener. And here's another exquisite bit of irony from John. At one level, she's mistaken – he's not some random gardener, but her beloved Teacher; yet at another level, she's not mistaken at all. For just as the Lord God liked to walk in the Garden of Eden, looking for his human creatures, so here the risen Jesus, identified now with the presence of God, is walking in the garden to find her.

This is an extraordinary text – so subtle and sophisticated. But in some ways this very sophistication raises a significant question, which is: how are we supposed

to bring it into conversation with *our* lives, our human experience? It's all very well to wonder and delight in its literary art, its brilliant inter-textuality. But how does the testimony of resurrection as recreation affect those of us who live, not in the text, but in the 'real' world? What does it even mean?

I guess, for me, a way of approaching these questions is to notice what happens for us each year as we celebrate the Easter mysteries. On Thursday night, we remember Jesus and his disciples on the brink of their descent into the maelstrom, their fragile little community torn apart by betrayal and fear, its goodness unmade by hostility without and weakness within. We acknowledge our own vulnerability to these forces of chaos and de-creation – as victims and perpetrators. On Friday, we witness and suffer the consequences. In the gospels, there are some who can be and bear with the pain of it, but others become vicious, while still others stand by – more or less complicit. And we see ourselves reflected in all these responses, remembering what it is to be overwhelmed by events that far exceed us, surviving as best we're able. On Saturday, we're in the aftermath – powerless to generate transformation out of our own resources and with nothing left but to be where we are. Till finally, on Sunday, something is given, something arrives from beyond. We don't expect it; we can barely even recognise it. But it's the inkling of possibility where there seemed to be none, the gift of forgiveness and renewed relationship, the first hint that life and meaning might come again.

Each year, we recapitulate this Easter story and each year it recreates us. It returns us to the ground of our being. It asks us to be deeply present to what's true and what's not in our selves, what's true and what's not in our life together. And what enables us really to go there is the story's testimony that something happened that first Easter, that embraces the whole of it with tender mercy. The forces of chaos and death did not ultimately triumph over Jesus and his community. Nothing that happened could stop the love of God flowing. And because of this we are given the chance to start over. Not in the sense that we pretend nothing happened, or that our untruths, equivocations and failures haven't had consequences. But in the sense

that we're enabled to trust that all that we are and all that befalls us is capable of being reintegrated, redeemed as we bring it to the light and are reconnected to our living source.

As that happens, we begin to go on differently, to be differently. We're not just takers, users, grasping hold of life's gifts for our own gratification, but become *participants* with God in the work of love and the creation of life. We are drawn into the same relationship with God in which Jesus stands, and so we are sent into the world as Jesus is sent. Mary is told: 'Do not hold onto me ... But go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God"'. So recreated, she went, and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'. And today, on this first day, so have we.