

31 March 2024

**Lurching into Life (Mark 16. 1-8)**

*Easter Day*

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This time last year (liturgically speaking at least), while you were freezing here on the island, Neil and I were in the southern Spanish city of Almeria. A Spanish Easter is, as some of you will know, an extraordinary thing. Easter Day for us came as the culmination of the astonishing pageantry of *Semana Santa* or Holy Week. While here we celebrate at the margins of the city – most of our fellow citizens going about their business without reference to the liturgies – in Spain, Easter takes over the streets. Every day, different guilds are responsible for organising processions which weave around and through the town, hundreds of people dressed in mediaeval costumes, carrying candles and holding up enormous floats on top of which are banks of more candles and huge statues of Mary, Queen of Heaven, Jesus in various poses, his disciples and assorted saints. Large brass bands accompany each procession and for days, the sound of music – sometimes distant, sometimes near – fills the air. It's simultaneously profoundly choreographed and profoundly communal – even amateurish – as those underneath the floats stagger at times under their weight and have to stop for a rest, while children carrying candles adjust their pointy mediaeval hats.

On Easter morning, we made our way to the forecourt of the Cathedral where people were starting to gather. Apart from general milling about, nothing happened for quite a while. But then we heard music in the distance. As it came nearer, the bishop emerged from the Cathedral to stand in the forecourt and behind him an enormous statue of Christ on the Cross was wheeled from inside the church into main doorway, looking out into the square. The music got louder, the crowds got denser, city dignitaries stepped onto the waiting podium ... and finally the procession itself entered the square and came into view. There were children dressed in white

and gold carrying candles, adults also in white and gold carrying empty golden crosses, the band, and then finally the Risen Christ. A great statue of Jesus, standing triumphant, face shining, holding the empty cross, was borne atop a huge float. He moved slowly through the square and was set down facing the bishop and the Cathedral door, facing the statue of the Crucified – as if facing down death.

Prayers were said; the bishop proclaimed a blessing. There was more milling about and then the float was picked up again. I thought that at this point, the figure of Jesus would be carried into the Cathedral – the symbolism of resurrection complete. But what happened next was unexpected and, for me, deeply moving. The float was clearly incredibly heavy. It took a fair amount of shuffling and coordination for it to be hoisted back onto the shoulders of its bearers. But once it was aloft, they started to turn. It became apparent that the Risen Christ was not to be brought into the building, but taken right through the square and out the other side back into the streets. Slowly, waveringly, staggering a little under the weight, the float began lurching its way into the city, accompanied by the sound of increasingly distant music.

At one level, there's nothing subtle about a Spanish Easter. A Christ depicted decked in gold and unambiguously triumphant risks co-option by empire, by Christendom, by the usual corruptions of human power. It seems profoundly at odds with the depiction of resurrection in Mark's gospel, where there is no sighting of the risen Christ; no uncomplicated triumph or assurance that's it's come out right. Just the sheer mystery – he is not here, he has been raised. Yet there was something in subtext of that Spanish procession – the very human struggle to carry the weight, the gallant, amateurish lurching off into the world – that does seem to fit. To reflect Mark's sense of how impossible is the commission to bear this news into a world that has little capacity to hear it, that is not looking for it and may not even really desire it. The women to whom the task first fell were seized by terror and amazement. It was too much, and they could say nothing to anyone because they were afraid.

All Lent and Easter we have been focusing on how Jesus' suffering and dying, his undergoing of our alienation and pain has in some sense broken their power over us. How it has made it possible for us – as we are joined to his love by his Spirit – to live with him on the other side of death and fear, to break through into the space of eternally transfigured possibility and fullness of life. Today is the ultimate ground for this hope. The testimony from resurrection is that the love and life of God are unkillable. Nothing that befalls us, nothing we do or say has power to separate us ultimately from reconciling goodness and newness of life. But it's one thing to hear this – even at some level to believe it. Even so, how is it sayable in a world witnessing the genocide of the Palestinian people? How is it meaningful for those gripped by agonies of remorse and unable to change what they've done, or for those suffering mental or physical anguish without end? How is news of resurrection more than an idle tale, an exotic pageant disconnected from the real world? How does it become something realisable, habitable, bearable?

The angel tells the frightened women that Jesus is going ahead of them to Galilee, 'there you will see him'. For them, resurrection doesn't dawn all at once; it doesn't make sense immediately. When they first encounter it, they're as far from the possibility as they can be. They've come to anoint a body, to grieve a death, to face up to catastrophic loss of meaning, identity, purpose. They've come to be true to the reality of their experience by doing what's next for them to do. In the story, they've been faithful to this truth over three days ... but three days signifies simply the time it takes. Three days signifies the necessary time. It could as well be three years or thirty. And notice, they do nothing else. They are committed simply to responding as kindly and generously as they can to what life has brought upon them. They don't make resurrection happen; they are met by it. And at first, it's merely confusing. They cannot make anything of it. It has no form they recognise or words that convince. It must be lived into to be known; they must let it lead them.

How is news of resurrection more than an idle tale, an exotic pageant disconnected from the real world? How does it become something realisable, habitable, bearable? Poet David Whyte writes:

Start close in, don't take the second step or the third,  
start with the first thing close in,  
the step you don't want to take ...<sup>1</sup>

Start where you are, start with the truth of your life, your love, your need.

Start right now take a small step you can call your own  
don't follow someone else's heroics,  
be humble and focused,  
start close in,  
don't mistake that other for your own.

We are come, sometimes despite ourselves, to the space we hope God is. We listen, we let insight arise, recognition dawn. Gallantly, faithfully, we are lurching our way into life.

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<sup>1</sup> David Whyte, 'Start Close In'.