

John 20:1-18; 1 Corinthians 15:35-38
Easter Sunday

12.04.20

From virus to seed

It's Easter Sunday – praise God! – and our reading from John's Gospel takes us to a garden. And when we think of a garden what probably comes to them minds of many of us is life: plants, flowers, growth. This garden, however, is rather different for in it there is a tomb - a new tomb as we are told in the previous chapter, but even a new, unused tomb speaks of death and decay. And there comes to this tomb a woman called Mary Magdalene, a dear friend of Jesus and she is in deep sorrow and for her this garden is only a place of death, for in that tomb in that garden lies the body of her beloved Lord and Master, brutally executed just days before. Or so she thought. For when she arrives she finds that the stone that sealed the tomb has been removed. And in her fear and panic she runs and summons other disciples - Peter and John - and they come to the tomb and there they find all the debris of death undone: grave cloths discarded and the head cloth rolled up by itself. And to their amazement the tomb is empty. So Peter and John return to their home and Mary is left alone and suddenly this figure stands before her asking, 'Woman why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?' She of course thinks he is the gardener – who else would you expect in a garden? And Mary, in desperation, demands to know where he has taken the body: 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell him where you have laid him!' And then that glorious moment, that single word softly spoken: 'Mary!' And suddenly Mary's grief- clouded eyes are opened and she recognises Jesus. And she returns to the disciples with this joyful message, 'I have seen the Lord!'

It is a story rich with allusion and the setting of the story in a garden is important. For here, of course, we are transported back to another story of another garden, the Garden of Eden, that place of peace and harmony where God walked and talked with Adam and Eve before they sinned and fell from grace. And as that was the opening scene of the first creation, this is the opening scene of the new creation, full of hope and possibility as death is a defeated foe – 'its pale ghost retreating' as one poet put it. And Mary of course is the new Eve, giving birth to life and hope with her message that Christ is risen. And Jesus is God, walking in the cool of the day as he did with Adam and Eve. Or maybe he is the new Adam – Adam, who together with Eve were banished from the garden for their sin - and now they have returned. Here is the second Adam in the second Eden, the beginning of a new world, the place of new life which will spread to the ends of the earth.

So picking up on this horticultural, gardening theme, I want to suggest on this Easter Day another metaphor for Mary, another way of reading her. I want us to imagine Mary as a seed, a seed of new life that blows out into the world from this garden. After all, she spreads the news to Peter and John of what she has found and she announces to the disciples that she has seen the Lord, telling them the things he had said to her. And then the disciples become seeds too, as they spread that good news throughout Jerusalem and to the ends of the earth. The disciples become seeds, thrown into the world by God, as in the story Jesus told about a sower who cast seed upon different kinds of soil. And as seeds we are watered in baptism and we are called to be fruitful and to bring new life to the world. And when in our reading from Paul's 1st Letter to the Corinthians he speaks of our death and resurrection, he describes us as seeds, perhaps of wheat or some other grain, and in burial it is as if we are being planted, awaiting resurrection to eternal life, each seed with its own new body. Here is an image for the Christian life of discipleship with the crucified and risen Lord: we are seeds, scattered into the world to proclaim and to live out the new life that emerges from that tomb in that garden on Easter Day.

Maybe, however, on this morning, in this context, on this lockdown Sunday when the world is hidden away in fear of this deadly virus, there is more to say, and let me explain. In the city of Ferguson in Missouri in the USA, there was for a time a makeshift memorial to a young, unarmed black man by the name of Michael Brown who was shot dead by a policeman in 2014, a memorial that has since been made permanent. The original memorial had been painted black and on it, written in gold, were the words, 'They tried to bury us. They didn't know we were seeds.' Apparently those words came originally from a Greek poet by the name of Dinos Christianopolous

who had been marginalised by the Greek literary community on account of his sexuality, and the phrase was also used by a liberation movement on behalf of an indigenous Mexican community threatened with extinction. ‘They tried to bury us. They didn’t know we were seeds.’ Well, whatever its origins, it’s a great phrase, one that springs to mind as we survey that scene in the garden on that first Easter Sunday. It could apply to Jesus as he defied those responsible for his death, and it could apply to the Christian movement that began that day and that was subject to opposition and resistance. ‘They tried to bury us. They didn’t know we were seeds.’

Well, maybe in the context of this particular Sunday, however – 2020, with the corona virus rampant throughout the world, this Easter story with its imagery of death and life, of a gardener and a garden and a seed has something to say to us. After all, we are threatened by a virus, a tiny, microscopic virus with an astonishing capacity to spread and to infect and to spread sickness and death. But we are talking today not of viruses but of seeds: tiny little bearers of life with an astonishing capacity to spread and to germinate and to bring life. And if we believe that God raised Christ from the dead then we believe in the power of the seed over the virus. The virus belongs to the tomb. It belongs to those discarded graveclothes where it can lurk and feed on death. But the seed belongs to the garden, where there is new life and growth. And already we see in the world signs of virus transformed into seed: in hospital wards and intensive care units where exhausted medical and nursing staff give their all to save the sick. And we see the virus transformed into seed in acts of neighbourliness where people show acts of kindness and thoughtfulness. All these - and so much more – are signs of a world already in the grip of resurrection. From that tomb in that garden there still blow seeds of new life that defy death. And who knows what might yet emerge from this terrible pandemic? Already people are asking, ‘will it all just go back to business as usual?’ Might things actually change? Might we learn to identify the viruses that infect our world and bring death and might we possessed of the defiance that says, ‘No. Viruses try to bury us. But they don’t know we are seeds.’ Praise God that in a world caught in the grip of Jesus’ resurrection, and where the tomb stands empty and inert while seeds of his new blow throughout the world, all things are possible.

So now come to table. Come to this table, where tiny seeds of wheat or some other grain have been buried, and risen, and become bread by the work of human hands. Feed here and in our homes on the risen Christ. And then become seeds, taking new life out into the world. Amen.