

Easter People Audio Retreat

Week 1 – Mary Magdalene at the garden tomb

Happy Easter! The Church gives 50 days – all the way to Pentecost – for us to share the greeting, and adds in alleluias wherever it can within its liturgy. How are your alleluias doing? The thing is that difficulties, irritations and challenges crowd in and sometimes crowd out. Easter joy may not be entirely absent, but it is elusive.

And the risen Christ is so much harder to take hold of than the Jesus of his years of ministry. Appearing here, and appearing there, but no permanence. As soon as he is recognized he is also no longer there – a brief shaft of sunlight on an otherwise cloudy day, a moment when a familiar and much-loved voice is heard and then falls silent.

The season of Lent holds our attention with its focus on personal renewal and its narrative building up towards the events that lead to Jesus' death. But for many of us the season of Easter passes us by. I wonder if joy is more difficult to know or stay with, than struggle?

Yet Easter is hope, is joy, and something more than momentary has moved us on into another country. The chains of death, defeat and desolation have been broken and are being broken, and will be broken. The stone across the tomb has been rolled away. Christ is risen and we too rise in him.

And so in these weeks we are going to explore what it means to be Easter people, shaped by this resurrection. We will do so in the company of those first witnesses of a mystery they did not understand, nor always feel, yet came to live by.

In John's Gospel, the Easter mystery unfolds first to a woman, Mary Magdalene, who comes to the tomb in the early morning while it is still dark. Perhaps you can picture or sense something of her as she makes that journey. Her walk is slow; her heart heavy. He who was her life is dead; yet there is no other place for her to go but the garden where his body lies. It is spring, and even before dawn the birds are singing.

When she nears the tomb she sees that the stone has been rolled away from its entrance. Who has done this? She runs, runs until she finds Simon Peter and John and gasps out what she cannot take in. The stone has been pulled aside – someone has moved the body. Where have they put him? They run off to see what has happened and she's left there alone with the awfulness of it all.

Dismayed, confused she makes her way back to the garden; the light is growing now. She peers into the tomb; there are two people there, asking her why she is crying. None of this makes sense. And then another voice behind her repeats the question. 'Woman, why are you crying. 'Have you taken away my lord – show me where you have laid him, I will look after him.' Then she hears her own name spoken – 'Mary' – and knows what is impossible to know. 'Rabbouni, teacher' she cries, holding him whom she thought lost. 'Do not cling to me', he tells her, 'go and tell them what you have seen'. And she lets go and leaves him, though everything in her must have wanted to stay there – the others need to know.

Running again; heart pounding with joy she wants to share; mind wrapped in confusion. She held him, she heard him call her name. She has let go of him, but the memory of that moment will always live in her.

My sense is that many of the key figures in John's Gospel have a universal significance; their experience, personal to them, also holds out the promise of our experience. Thus, we are the woman at the well, thirsting for a deeper life and Jesus comes to open within us a spring of the Spirit. We are the man born

blind who in the encounter with Jesus, will grow, step by step, into truth and light. We are Lazarus, dead and bound for whom Jesus risks all, moved with compassion; calling him and us by name, 'Come out from where you sleep; be unbound, be free. And – in entering the Easter mystery, we are Mary, lost and confused; it is still dark; we can make no sense of our experience. And then a presence, a voice. Not the answer to all our questions, nor the urgent command given to Lazarus, but a gentle and intimate calling of our name that transcends time, and is wider, deeper and higher than whatever has happened in the past or will happen in the future.

This is Easter, and like Mary, it cannot be clung to. Nor does it need to be clung to. It was never our possession, it came as a gift, and will come in that way again. We do not need to cling to everything being all right in our world, or having answers, or even feeling good. Easter is not dependent on a continual feeling of joy, or a certainty of faith. It is the gift of the presence of the risen one that we might glimpse in a moment and will never be taken from us; it is our naming that we go on hearing long into any silence that follows. It is the surprise of morning light after long hours of night. We can't cling on to the joy of a moment, but we can greet it gladly when it comes and go on rejoicing in its resonance long after its passing.

We have 50 Easter days to savour joy. It will take time for joy to seep down deep into the roots of our being – not only into the great tragedies of our life but also into the smaller inconveniences and minor slights that daily trip us up and separate us from joy. At least that's my experience.

I think too that it's also old scripts that undermine our openness to joy – the scripts that come from our past experience and the messages we have breathed in through our upbringing – our sense of not being good enough to be loved, to be OK, the warnings we have received about not trusting life, ourselves or others. It's hard to be joyful when these scripts harry us. Until that is, we let go into the larger joy that transcends our limitations.

The larger joy that is echoed in the springtime of Mary's story – at the great spring feast of Passover. The garden is rising from its winter tomb. And that – if we ever doubted it through long winter months – is how it is. Bird song begins at the very first glimmers of dawn, urging us to get up and meet the day; tree buds break in unimaginable greenness, bees sway in the new warmth of the sun. He who was dead now lives. There will be spring. The seed that fell to the ground and died is awaking and all creation with it. There is spring, and all that we are – and sometimes struggle with – is being made whole, free and alive in him.

Whoever you are, and whatever your story, Easter is given for you. No judgement, struggle, sadness, evil, loneliness you know will have the final word – for there is another word – the speaking of your name.

No wonder the Church gives us 50 days to savour this hope and this joy.