

Matthew's Easter

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Lord of all life and power,
who through the mighty resurrection of your Son
overcame the old order of sin and death
to make all things new in him:
grant that we, being dead to sin
and alive to you in Jesus Christ,
may reign with him in glory.

Happy Easter: Jesus is risen from the dead – alleluia !

Our text this morning may be found in Matthew's gospel chapter 28 verses 5&6:

'Do not be afraid: I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified.

He is not here; for he has been raised . . .'

The four gospels each give an account of the resurrection. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John each share the essential facts but differ in detail. Each has a visit first thing on Sunday morning by Mary Magdalene on her own or with companions; of an angel or angels being present; of the stone having been rolled away; and an encounter with the risen Lord Jesus. All four share the joy of knowing that the man the disciples loved, whom they rightly believed to have died, is in fact now restored to life, having risen from the dead. So my question this morning is what is particular to Matthew's account of the resurrection ?

What is distinctive about Matthew's account is the idea that the tomb is guarded. Our fourth panel in the stained glass window above the altar here in St Bart's has a picture of the guards, struck dumb and motionless with terror, as the angel of God opens the grave to let Jesus out. To the onlookers, it feels like an earthquake and, understandably, they are terrified. The guards are there with Pilate's agreement because the Jewish authorities want to prevent anyone stealing Jesus' body – and after the event, they bribe them to spread false news that the disciples stole the body while they slept.

Like Mark, Matthew has two women come to the tomb – Mary Magdalene, according to Matthew, is accompanied by the other Mary whom Mark names as the mother of James and Salome. For Mark, they've come to anoint Jesus' body; for Matthew, they come simply to see the tomb and perhaps to pray outside the place where Jesus had been laid to rest and there to remember him. Mark and Matthew only have one angel present. For Mark, the angel is a young man. Both agree he's dressed in white but Matthew adds the wonderful detail that his appearance was like lightening. I guess that might mean that the angel seemed to radiate bright, dazzling light rather than lightening flashes.

Mark concentrates on the fear that they felt at this angelic encounter, the shock of the empty tomb which left them speechless. Matthew couples this genuine fear at the angelic encounter with real joy at what the angel told them. That Jesus has risen and that they should go and share the news with the disciples which they set off to do. But no sooner had they started, when Jesus meets them. What I find

interesting is that according to Matthew they took hold of his feet. To do so, I am guessing that they would have had to have prostrated themselves on the ground in front of the man they loved – a sign in the bodily language of the day of deep respect, of awe and of reverence. And, by doing so, they have actual physical connection with Jesus, actually touching the man they thought was dead but who is now once more warm flesh and blood.

To me, that the four evangelists' accounts differ is a sign that they are genuine, each reflecting something a little different in what was told to them, passed on to them by those who first witnessed the resurrection first-hand.

Easter is a wonderful moment in the story of our faith. The accounts of Easter all point to the triumph of life over death, the victory of the love of God over the sin of Man, the restoration of the one we love with us who love him. Easter is why I, as a Christian, am optimistic and why, in spite of everything, I have hope in the life of the world to come. What about you ?

I have spoken in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

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