

As we continue our series 'as you come' we come to Easter Day and John 20. In our passage there are comings and goings but it is the coming I want to focus on and the results of those comings both for those there at the time and for us.

We have come this morning to worship on this Easter day and as you come what are the thoughts and emotions running through you? How do you view things as you come this morning?

At the centre of our passage are three people. Mary Magdalene, Peter and John.

Each of them came to the tomb, to Jesus, on that first Easter day. They came with different agendas, thoughts and emotions and each seems to have had a different response to what they saw that morning.

Let's remind ourselves of this very familiar story and as we do so we'll tease out the threads of these three people.

1. As you come

It was v1, early and still dark on that Sunday morning as Mary Magdalene made her way to the tomb. We know from other accounts that she wasn't on her own. We know also that she and the others had come and "brought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body" (Mark 16:1).

So as she came her expectation was to find a dead body and her emotion was sadness and, from the fact that it was very early in the morning which suggests they didn't want to be seen, uncertainty.

They did not come expecting to see Jesus alive.

Later when Mary had returned to the disciples and told them the tomb was empty Peter and John ran to see what had happened.

Peter came with the crowing of the cock probably still ringing in his ears. His failure was still raw. He came to investigate a missing body. His thoughts and emotions are not known of course but so many thoughts must have been going through his head as he ran to the tomb.

I remember some years back in the early hours of the morning getting a phone call from my son who was here at Christ Church saying there had been a break in and he had disturbed the men. Having told him to phone the police. I jumped out of bed got dressed and got in the car and drove down here. So many thoughts were going through my head as I made that journey.

John also came with Peter to the tomb of Jesus and again we can't second guess his thoughts though John hadn't gone through the gamut of emotions that Peter had. He seems to have been more placid but he too, having heard the news of the empty tomb, ran to see.

2. Their response to the empty tomb

We may not know about their thoughts and emotions as they came to the tomb but we are told of their very different responses to what they saw.

Mary v1&2, “saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put him!”

What was she saying? How did she understand it? She said someone has taken the body. In effect she was sure that Jesus hadn’t risen from the dead. The idea doesn’t seem to have occurred to her. She saw and her verdict was he has not risen but that his body has been taken. That’s what she told the disciples and that is what sent them running to the tomb.

Peter got there and v6 went into the tomb, though what he hoped to see in the early morning light in a dark cave I’m not sure. But he seems to have made out the cloths that had been round Jesus body and the one round his head but no body. What did Peter make of it? Well in a sense we are not told but v9 seems to give us a clue, “They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead”. They still did not understand. He saw that the body was not there but I think John is telling us Peter did not understand that he was risen. At best he was not sure what had happened.

Meanwhile John, who seems to have had a bit of Gordon’s competitive edge about him because he mentions that he got there first and had a look in but didn’t go in until Peter had gone in. But then v8, “Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed.” What we are meant to understand is that John quickly understood what had happened. He believed that Jesus had risen.

The same evidence but three different responses, not risen, not sure, risen.

As you come this morning where do you see yourself? Who do you identify with? Are you Mary, Peter or John? Are you stuck as Mary was with a wrong understanding of the resurrection still casting around, as many do, for some way of explaining the empty tomb other than that which the gospel writers show us? Or are you as Peter was puzzled and wondering what has happened? Or are you there with John believing that he has risen and so come here today to celebrate and praise God for the fact that sin has been defeated and death no longer has the victory over us.

On this Easter morning where do you find yourself?

However, despite the differences by the end of the day all three were able to say with great confidence and joy “He is risen”. All three by the end of the day were certain, excited and jubilant – how?

3. “I have seen the Lord”

Let’s start again with Mary and vs11&12, “Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus’ body had

been, one at the head and the other at the foot. They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?" "They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him."

She saw the two angels. Now I don't want to knock Mary here but let's be honest if you see a couple of angels you might have a sneaking suspicion that something unusual is happening – but perhaps Mary didn't at that moment recognise them as angels. Turning round, v14 she saw a man standing in the garden and certainly didn't recognise who it was, thinking him to be a gardener.

Mary was seeing things but still that initial response that Jesus hadn't risen was there and she expressed it in v13 – "they've taken the body and I don't know where they have put him." Mary needs to get beyond that to see it is not a matter of the body being moved but of resurrection.

Turning to this man she saw as the gardener she repeated her understanding v15 "Sir if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him and I will get him." And then she heard one word from Jesus, just her name "Mary" and it as if the scales fall from her eyes and she saw who he was and knew that Jesus had risen and then v18 she told the disciples, her friends, that Jesus had risen. She was the first person in John's gospel to testify that Jesus had risen. It was not the seeing of Jesus but hearing him call her name that changed it for Mary. Through that word she recognised Jesus and the only explanation was that he had risen. She recognised Jesus.

So what of Peter and John? Well v10 they went back to their homes, which really means they went back to their own place. But what an anti-climax? They have just seen the evidence of the resurrection – the most amazing sight in history. How many people have flocked since to the possible sight of the empty tomb? Here are Peter and John, they come to the tomb see it is empty and go dully home – an anticlimax. Mind you how many times have I rushed home to tell my family of the latest great victory by Kettering Town only to be great with yes very nice dear – what an anticlimax. But for Peter and John things were also going to change with this amazing appearance of Jesus in the upper room. There v20 he appeared and he showed them his hands and his side and they were "overjoyed" when they saw the Lord. Jesus had promised that their sorrow would turn to joy and now it has. Overjoyed can hardly describe what they must have felt when they saw those marks which showed most clearly that this was the Lord.

They saw Jesus and Peter believed he had risen and John had his belief confirmed.

4. What about us?

So what about us? We may have different views this morning of the empty tomb and what it means. John has written his book as we've seen a number of times so that, "you may believe "that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." (John 20:30). What might help us to change as Mary changed or to believe as Peter and John did?

Well for them what they saw was very important. They saw the empty tomb and the risen Lord. Now I realise we can't see those things in the same physical way as Mary and Peter and John but through the witness of the gospel writers we can see the evidence of the empty tomb which asks us to respond. Some will take the human rational line and say that because the dead don't rise someone must have interfered with the body. But I'm sure many of us here would say no. God's power knows no limits and the empty tomb points clearly not to human interference but Godly action in raising Jesus from the dead. But more than that, those early disciples saw the risen Jesus and their testimony to that as set out in the gospels is there for us to see. Have you looked at this evidence? Have you been able in it to see that Jesus rose? I hope we can see that Jesus who died on that cross taking the penalty of my sin and yours rose again to show that our sin has been paid for and that we will in him rise to life eternal. Have you seen that? Have you like Mary turned and recognised this Jesus not just as the man from Galilee but the Lord of life risen from the dead? Perhaps not – perhaps some of us are like Mary looking and yet not seeing. If so let me encourage you to carry on looking, can I suggest a book like Michael Green's 'The Day death died'?

But also listen. It was Jesus' word that helped Mary see and often as God's word is explained what is unclear becomes clear – O.K. I know the opposite also happens. But we need as Mary, Peter and John did to hear. Listen to the word of God as it is explained to us but also as Jesus speaks directly to us.

Have you heard his voice as Mary did calling you by name because he knows you loves you and wants you to follow him? Have you heard his voice saying peace be with you the assurance that because our sin is dealt with through the cross we are restored into a right relationship with God, no longer God's enemies because of our rebellion and sin but God's friends, God's children. Have you heard those words?

As we will see more with Gordon next week, in the verses after these doubting Thomas both sees and hears the risen Lord and is able to confirm Jesus as 'My Lord and my God.' (John 20:28) to which Jesus replied "because you have seen me you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." (John 20:29) That is the message to us, it is possible to believe in the resurrection without physically seeing Jesus.

Here is the great truth of Easter day that eventually Mary, Peter and John saw and rejoiced in that the one who had died a cruel death has risen again. Here is the focus of our celebration today. Here is the focus of our faith for today and tomorrow. We believe that Jesus died and rose again and because he rose so one day will we.