

Lessons

1 Corinthians 15: 1 – 11

St Mark 16: 1 – 8

Prayer of Illumination

Let us pray.

Holy God, Sacred Mystery, bless our meditations, that we may be still, at one with You, that our thoughts may be shaped and informed by Your Presence and love. Amen.

St Paul said that Jesus was buried; He was raised on the third day; He appeared to Cephas and the twelve; He appeared to more than 500 brothers and sisters at one time; He appeared to James and the apostles; and, finally, He appeared to the apostle himself. In his First Letter to the Corinthians, Paul said that Jesus ‘appeared’; He appeared to a whole host of different people, men and women, and in numerous locations, on occasion at the same time. What does it mean Jesus ‘appeared’?

There is no record in any of the Gospels of the actual Resurrection; I mean, no record of the moment in which Jesus rises from the dead. Appearances of the Christ already risen from the dead are found in the later Gospels of Matthew, Luke and John, but not in earliest Gospel, the Gospel of Mark. Jesus rising from the dead is hidden,

concealed in the darkness of the cave. The Resurrection stories, the accounts of Jesus appearing to His disciples and others, are like many other stories in the Bible. They are carefully crafted narratives weaving together mythology, spirituality, liturgy and fragments of history. The stories are intended for meditation; they are to be read imaginatively. In a washing machine manual, words only have one meaning; this is not so in the Bible.

We are told that Jesus rose from the dead on the third day. St Paul tells us that and the third day is stressed in the Gospel of Luke, in the story of Christ appearing on the Road to Emmaus. In the Book of Acts, the apostle Peter told the crowd that Jesus was raised on the third day. Details in Scripture are seldom incidental. Names, story lines and imagery are almost always suggestive of other stories. In the Book of Genesis, in the story of Abraham and the gruesome binding of his son Isaac, we are told that the drama unfolds on the third day. We read:

After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, 'Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am.' He said, 'Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt-offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you.' So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt-

offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away.

It was on Mount Moriah that Abraham prepared the wood and fire, bound his son to the altar and raised the knife for his sacrifice. A ghastly story, a vivid story with many meanings, but the drama took place on the third day. Out of death, or possible death, came life, new life. First century Jewish listeners could not hear the stories of the Resurrection of Jesus without thinking about the Old Testament stories and their meaning.

In the Book of Exodus, in the story of the Ten Commandments, it is on the third day that Moses ascended Mount Sinai. Amidst the thunder, lightning and blast of a trumpet, Moses entered the thick darkness where God was. Crucially, Moses encountered the Eternal on the third day. These details are not coincidental. This is a genre of writing and a detail used in one place may be suggestive of earlier stories.

In our Gospel lesson this morning, we are told that the women wonder how they will move the stone, the large stone, from the entrance of the tomb? On arrival, the women find that the heavy

stone is already rolled back. In the later Gospel of John, the Risen Christ is able to enter and leave rooms which are locked. Paul told us that the Risen Christ appeared to 500 brothers and sisters at once. If we read the Scripture story literally, we may reasonably ask, 'Why is the stone rolled back?' Surely, the Risen Christ did not need to move it to escape? Perhaps it was moved so that the women and disciples could look inside, but together they could have moved it themselves. There is a falseness to this aspect of the story. The women are hardly likely to set out on the journey and, half way there, think, 'Oh, how are we going to move the stone?'

When the women do enter the tomb, gaze into the darkness of the cave, they see a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting to the right. The young man told the woman that Jesus, who had been crucified, was raised from the dead. A young man, dressed in white: an angel? Is there another story in the Bible which involves a stone and an angel?

The stone may draw us back to the story of Jacob at Bethel. Jacob used one of the stones of Bethel as a pillow. In his dream, he saw a ladder on earth, the top of which reached to heaven; on the ladder

angels were ascending and descending. In the dream, the LORD stood beside Jacob and said, 'I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac.' In Matthew's account, the angel has descended from heaven. On waking from his dream, Jacob said, 'Surely the LORD is in the place – and I did not know it!' He named the place Bethel, meaning the house of God. Jacob said, 'This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.' Through mention of the stone in the faith narrative and the presence of the angel, both Mark and Matthew hint at the empty tomb being the gate of heaven.

It is possible that the angel is a reminder of the angel Michael, the great prince, who was prophesied to appear when the dead shall rise. In the Book of Daniel, we read, 'Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake....'

In the Gospel of John, two angels appear: one at the head and one at the foot of where the body of Jesus had lain. For a Jewish listener, this detail is suggestive of the cherubim which sat on the lid of the Ark of the Covenant. The ark rested in the Holy of Holies in the temple, the most sacred place on earth for the Jews. It is possible

that the fourth evangelist wants us to see that the empty tomb, the rising of Jesus from the dead, is the new Holy of Holies, the dwelling-place of God.

I hope by now you see that Resurrection stories, like most biblical stories, call for our imaginative engagement. At its core, Resurrection is about union with God. Jesus is not immortal because He was raised from the dead; He was raised from the dead because He is immortal. Jesus repeatedly taught His followers to see the Kingdom of heaven within themselves. Having lived a life in God on earth, in death He was alive. In Judaism, Moses was raised to new life, and so too Enoch and Elijah. In an argument with the Sadducees, Jesus said that the great patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, were already alive in God. In a mystical vision, in a moment of transfiguration, Jesus stood alongside Moses and Elijah who were already alive in God, already raised from the dead. In his Letter to the Galatians, Paul said, 'I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.'

The spiritual writer, Martin Laird, tells the story of a young prisoner who self-harmed in order to escape the hurt inside. With the help of

the Prison Phoenix Trust, the prisoner began to learn how to pray. Laird writes, "After learning how to meditate and practising it twice a day for several weeks, the young prisoner speaks movingly of what he has learnt. 'I just want you to know that after only four weeks of meditating half an hour in the morning and at night, the pain is not so bad, and for the first time in my life, I can see a tiny spark of something within myself that I can like.'"

Resurrection is something that happens in the heart. It is in here, in the soul, the consciousness, that we taste immortality. When Paul said Christ appeared, he meant that Christ appeared to the inner eye: those who open to the possibility, to those prepared to penetrate beneath the surface of the Bible, beneath the surface of the world, into the darkness of the mind's cave. It is there we encounter the Risen Christ.

Amen.