

EASTER VIGIL 2010
Matthew 28: 1-10
"Let him Easter in us."

Jesus was crucified – well and truly dead. In a cave-like tomb, with a great stone rolled across the front. According to the gospel writer Matthew, watched over by Roman guards. This fella had been a troublemaker, and the Roman leaders didn't want any post-death riots. Neither was anyone going to steal his body away.

Women had sat by, also watching. They saw Jesus laid in the tomb, and they returned, two days later. "... as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb." Matthew tells us there were two women, Luke names more; John names only Mary Magdalene. By all accounts, it was women coming to the tomb. What were their hopes and thoughts? What drew them there?

These women went to the tomb "to see" as Matthew puts it. Matthew shows them to be open-minded, and despite their grief, drawn and alert to something. The other gospel writers focus more on these women coming with spices for further ritual anointing. There was no way any of them could stay away from their beloved. They were all drawn to the tomb; to the body of this man who had declared he was the Son of God.

Because we know the end of this story, we often don't dwell on the detail here. These women, close to Jesus, probably including his mother, had been left desolate by his death. Bewildered, grieving. Was it really the end of the hopes they'd had that this Jesus was the promised Messiah? The Son of God? I often wonder what Mary, his mother, was thinking – she knew his conception was nothing ordinary; she knew Jesus' relationship to God his Father. Yet death was death. Jesus might have raised others from death, but who was around to raise him up?

And here's where their world flipped upside down. Not just their world, but ours, too. There was no Jesus in the tomb. He'd gone.

Matthew, with graphic imagery common to ancient authors, and at pains to highlight the event, describes it in apocalyptic terms – an earthquake, with an angel, rolling back the stone. The other gospel writers have the women arrive to find the stone already rolled away. Nonetheless, Jesus wasn't there. No body.

All of the gospel writers have angels give the women the message that Jesus has risen from the dead. Then, in various ways described in each gospel, Jesus appears to his disciples. He is risen; resurrected, not resuscitated. He was stone cold dead and now is alive. That's very clear.

It also becomes apparent, as he appears to his disciples, that he's still the same Jesus, not a spirit or ghost or vision. Yet it seems there's something different. He seems to be able to materialise through locked doors, but he can eat and drink and his flesh is real. There's a transformation, but it's still clearly him. Still all human and all divine.

What about for us today? What calls us here in darkness, at an hour when sensible people are still in bed? From the sober reflectiveness of Lent, through the self-examination and death of self in Holy Week, through the embrace of Christ's arms stretched out on the cross on Good Friday, we have arrived here. The horror of the crucifixion is over. We're at the empty tomb, expecting....what?

Is it all completely celebration, paying homage to, and rejoicing at the fact of Jesus' resurrection? Or do we come with other thoughts and other hopes and needs? Is our head and knowledge doing the affirming of resurrection and new life, while our inner beings protest, feeling a void and an uncertainty?

The promise is new life. The gift is new life. It is given. Yet the reality can seem a long way from that, in terms of feelings and experience and outward circumstance. Jesus may have risen from the tomb, but some may feel they are still there, bound in grave cloths with a stone across the door. It's not Jesus' tomb, it's ours, we might be crying out inside; trapped in a Holy Saturday of "*ambiguity and hope rather than present fulfilment and certainty.*"¹ Waiting for an earthquake, angels or mere men –or women – to roll back the stone and set us free. Or, if not in the grave, waiting for the light to dawn – the light of Christ in our lives, the light of a new fire of the Spirit in us, the light that has perhaps grown dim, and here we wish to re-light it?

What do we do about that? Even if we're here rejoicing –all well with our world, there'd be few of us who don't know what that grave is like, who haven't had times when the lights are out and seem unable to be lit. Few of us who don't know that that potential for grief and darkness still lurks.

So what do we do to move us from the darkness of Holy Saturday to the new light of Easter? Start with an honesty that matches what Christ knows anyway, which doesn't diminish his love for you one iota. Don't deny that there is a death of life in your experience of darkness. Stay with the Mary's, the women at the tomb. They were the ones able to grieve. They were the ones with courage enough to come to the grave, to see. They were the ones prepared to face this death, to plumb its meaning. They were the ones entrusted with the message that "Jesus is risen. He is alive."

¹ Andrew McGowan, "*Hope and Ambiguity: the world of Holy Saturday*" The Melbourne Anglican, April 2009.

Gerard Manley Hopkins has a wonderful poem, "The Wreck of the Deutschland," where he uses the phrase "Let him Easter in us." Here we can look at the real truth, the transforming reality of Easter. Let Easter get into us. Let Easter come and live where we live. Let Easter permeate our souls. Let this life-transforming life of Christ be taken into ourselves, into the very heart of us, where we hurt, where we feel pain, where we are dead to life, where we are inclined to do evil and to think and do things that make life a misery for ourselves and others, or worse.

Not a never-ending Holy Saturday of the grave. Not Easter as a long-ago event. But, rather, Easter as something that transforms our present lives, as something that gives us new life now, as something that gives us hope and meaning and courage. Easter as a verb, a living action. "Let him Easter in us".

To finish with the words of one preacher: The good news of the Christian faith is about *death*. Not a denial. There is Good Friday death; there is the tomb and lostness of Easter Saturday. We're invited to an honest acceptance of the darkness that is in life, in the Christian life... *but* proclaiming that we are *not* trapped in it. Saying that death itself is a doorway into *new life*... it is in itself liberating. The good news is that death frees us for life! No matter how dead we may feel, life *is* coming... in fact, life is here.²

"Let him Easter in us"

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

² Parts of this paragraph attributed to Grant Bullen, Easter Vigil, 2009