

In the Garden Meditation on John 20: 1-18

Sisters and brothers,
What a strange story really. Full of mystery and hard to grasp.
The mystery at the heart of John's story of the resurrection is first a strange absence, and then a strange presence. On the first Easter morning Christ was not where people expected him to be.

He was dead, and his body had been laid in the tomb.
Through the long Sabbath day, Mary and the others who had been Jesus' friends, who had watched him die in agony, had waited to do for him the last service they could. Early the next morning Mary Magdalene went to the tomb. And Jesus was not there... Easter is a shock – not only to Mary. Easter begins with the terror of an empty grave. Easter meant fear and worry and an increasing number of rumours and indications that Jesus was not simply dead and disappeared, but more or less still within reach and still close to his friends.

Mary had left the house while it was still dark to get to the place of Jesus' burial. When she arrived at the tomb the stone had been rolled away, and she set off immediately to fetch the other disciples. She went for Peter, who at once left the house together with John and ran to the tomb. John just peered in, but Peter, hasty as ever, rushed inside. Where Jesus' body had been they only found a pile of linen. And we read that they went home again.

It is Mary who stays. She remains at the tomb – weeping.
Her grief and pain at the loss of her friend are now being increased by the loss of his body. Yet in spite of her grief, she plucks up the courage to look into the tomb and sees two angels sitting where Jesus must have been lying.

What strikes me about Mary in the garden is that she does not stop a second and think "All of this can't be true." She does not stop and worry that there is no way that this can be Jesus; she simply recognises him and is joyful.
Thinking that things are possible opens entirely new ways of seeing life!
It was partly Mary's trustful approach, her spontaneous believing that made her proclaiming possible.

Just try to remember: there are occasions when what we expect, what seems likely, is simply not what happens. We can probably all think of times in our lives when our expectations have been entirely misleading, when things turned out much better – or much worse – than we had ever expected, times in which our limited faith determined what was possible and what was not, times when joy broke through, even in moments of the most shattering despair, times when the sun rose again after endless struggles in pain and darkness...

It seems to me that Mary's encounter with the risen Christ is an encounter in which what is probable has been entirely changed by what is possible. Mary's faith allows her to see and to recognise what she had not expected – what she knew could not be – the living Christ. Her faith allows her to look and see, and then bear witness. Her faith enables what is possible. Her willingness, her openness, her honesty, even her showing-the-pain... all these make resurrection possible.

Part of celebrating Easter is a reaffirmation that reason is not all of what faith is about. Our reason tends to lead us to expect the world to be an orderly place in which patterns which have worked in the past, will also work in the future. In science and in daily life, we use our reason to predict what will happen – that the sun will rise at a certain time tomorrow, that my car will start, that it will take such and such a time to get to wherever I am planning to go. When we do that, we are basically expecting in the future only what worked in the past. And in a way we are predicting what comes, according to what is probable and obvious.

For Mary the astonishing truth was that she met Jesus in the garden. The deep truth is in the encounter, in the actual meeting, rather than in arguments about whether or not this encounter could scientifically have taken place. What is important is that we enter into it – acknowledging that our thinking does not comprehend everything, that there are mysteries with which we must live.

Mary in the garden met a gardener who was not a gardener at all, but her beloved friend whom she mourned. In her mourning, in all the pain of death and sadness, she was still able not to cling to what had been before, but to grasp something entirely new, to break free of what was simply probable, predictable, likely. Can we break free? Are we able to recognise that which God makes possible beyond all the limits of our expecting and understanding? Are we open to meet God in new and surprising ways that change our lives so much that we too, can't stop bringing the message to others in the ways we live and talk? I so hope we will...

And I hope that we can resist the big temptation to not believe the story of Jesus' resurrection, to ask for proof, to seek explanations, to want to make everything safe and nice and easy; to bind God's actions to the way the world works, and to seek the risen Christ only in the places we expect him to be.

I pray that our eyes will be open to see the face of the risen Christ in the faces of the people we meet, and that with courage we proclaim that Jesus is not dead but alive in this world today.
Amen.