

Easter Day
12th April 2020



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Dear Friends in Christ,

We are an Easter People, and our song is Alleluia!!!

Today we celebrate the heart of our faith. Three little words: He is Risen! Three little words: I love you! *Where death is thy sting?* Today we celebrate the love of God in Jesus, who died for us: to set us free from sin; bringing us new and eternal hope beyond even the worst agonies of our temporal life! God answers our prayers, allays our fears, and is listening to *every word* we lift to Him in the Salvic love of Jesus Christ.

Even in the horror of Coronavirus, there is New Life! During this Holy Week, a trainee Midwife, whose studies have been fast-tracked to allow her to begin work on an overstretched NHS London ward, delivered her first baby! In the midst of regulations forbidding human touch, a little girl has been born – and the family have named her after this new Midwife, who was herself born on Easter Day: Florence, which means the *'flourishing of New Life'*! Amen to that, and thank God for baby Florence's birth!

**The Risen Christ shines upon us – this joyful day, may our homes and our hearts resound with joy and thanksgiving to the glory of the Lord!
Alleluia! Christ is risen. He is Risen, indeed. Alleluia!**



The Empty Cross and Tomb
Courtesy of Jenna Bunce, age 11
In Sparsholt



The Empty Tomb - Eastleigh
Young Engineers Home Project
Courtesy of Zoe Lavers in Crawley

John 20 (NIV) **The Empty Tomb**

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and 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!'

So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen. Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.) Then the disciples went back to where they were staying.

Jesus Appears to Mary Magdalene

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.' At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus. He asked her, 'Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?' Thinking he was the gardener, she said, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him.'

Jesus said to her, 'Mary.' She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, 'Rabboni!' which means 'Teacher'.

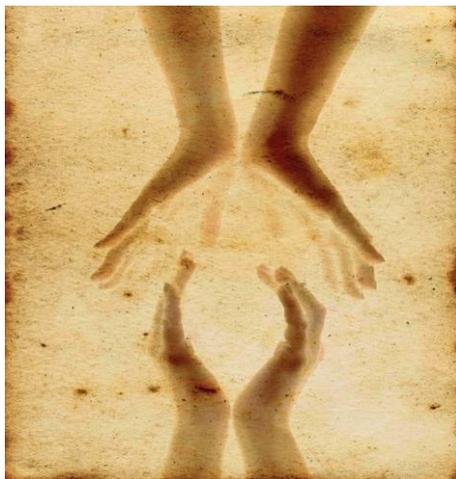
Jesus said, 'Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.' Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: 'I have seen the Lord!' And she told them that he had said these things to her.



'Noli me tangere' – Titian

During the Coronavirus pandemic, we have all become used to social distancing phrases such as 'Don't touch me' and 'Keep your distance,' which mirror Jesus' words to Mary Magdalene: *'Noli me tangere – Do not hold on to me.'* (John 20: 17)

It is a tough call. For many of us, our natural instinct is to be with people and to hold and to embrace each other, especially in times of illness, anxiety and loss. Touch is a profoundly important aspect of human relationship. For many lonely and bereaved people, one of the worst aspects of being separated from their beloved, or of not being in close relationship with another at all, is the absence of physical contact. Even if we are not naturally tactile, the reassurance perhaps of a kiss or a hug become so important when the gift of touch is taken away from us. It is a deep sadness that we are not able to worship together in our churches during this time of Lockdown – our gathering as the body of Christ offers us all an important blessing of touch and fellowship. At present, there are so many unprecedented tragedies, in particular, the harrowing reality of families not being able to visit sick and dying relatives in hospital. So how are we acting in the Risen Christ's name during this Coronavirus crisis? We are re-imagining new ways of touching each other through phone calls, emails, video-conferencing; support networks, social messaging, clapping and singing. Alleluia!!!



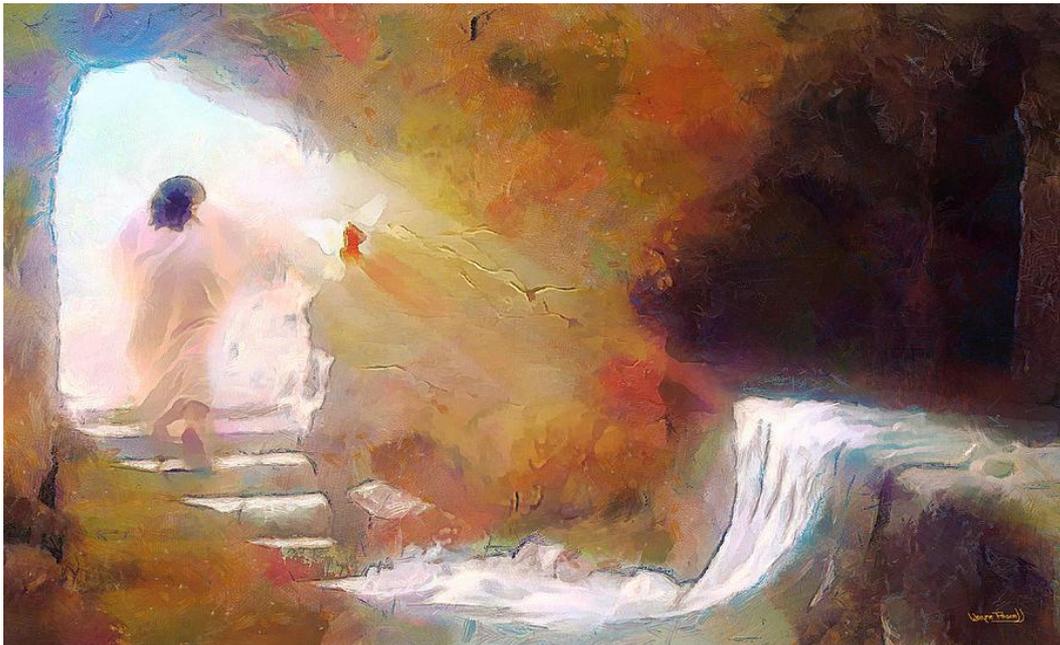
During Lent, I was reminded of the beautiful Advent poem by Edwin Muir *'The Angel and the Girl'* in which Mary sees the angelic presence of God face to face:

... See, they have come together, see,
While the destroying minutes flow, how
Each reflects the other's face
Till heaven in hers and earth in his
Shine steady there....

There is no sense that the two ever touch, yet the communion between them is as profound a connection as our world has ever known. Muir develops the heightened sense of vision between them, with Mary so clearly seeing God's call on her life and the Angel seeing her perfect grace. The poem deftly links Christmas to Easter - the womb and the tomb, as our eyes are opened to the essence of what it is to be Christian: to see Jesus, is to be born anew, and in saying 'yes' and abandoning ourselves in hope and faith to His saving love, as Mary does, we are freed to shine out Christ's face of love as He touches the world through us.

The last Chapter of John's Gospel offers us a personal witness as to what it means to see and be seen by Jesus. It reminds us too that *not everyone* who looks actually sees what is going on. I pray it encourages each of us to be patient in faith in these extraordinarily trying times in which we are unable to reference our usual frames of worship – when it is hard to see Jesus or when we feel isolated and unseen by Him.

As a counterpoint to the clear, unflinching 'yes' of Jesus' mother, Mary, at the beginning of his life, Mary Magdalene's Resurrection vision of Jesus is not so immediate, not so clear. John's account of *this* Mary seeing Jesus paints at once a faithful yet intensely troubling picture as she comes at dawn to Jesus' tomb. In her grief, Mary Magdalene is confused, bewildered, lost and angry. Her hopes are smashed: Jesus has been betrayed, beaten, broken and buried.



Halleluia, He is Risen! by Wayne Pascall

In the middle of that long and restless night after His crucifixion, Mary yearns for Jesus, echoing the young girl searching for her lover in the Song of Solomon: *'I will get up and roam the city, searching in all its streets and squares; I will search for the one I love.'* (Song of Songs 3:2) One more kiss; one more touch; one more chance to say 'I love you?' The real and painful bargain of grief! Perhaps, in tending his body, Mary can do something for Him – bring Him some dignity after all His human frame has endured? Perhaps she can find some solace for *herself* in touching Him one last time? Perhaps seeing Him might help her comprehend the reality of His death? Perhaps she wants to be with Him body and soul, risking being killed herself as she passes through the dark corridors of Jerusalem to His tomb - where every shadow is a potential threat. Roman and Jew: all Jerusalem is against the Jesus people now.

When she arrives at the tomb her nightmare explodes in a new wave of grief and disbelief: The stone is rolled back ... and Jesus' body is gone. Has someone taken Him? Surely His precious body has been defiled enough? Mary is desolate; she can barely breathe. She cries out to the gardener who, please notice, is standing close by her in her agony: *'Where have you taken Him? Have you seen the one I love?'*

In the midst of Mary's unfolding nightmare, her wish has come true. Jesus has appeared to her, yet she doesn't recognise Him. She just doesn't see. It seems so extraordinary that Mary, who has been so close to Jesus, and who is thinking of no-one BUT Jesus, cannot see Him in front of her!

He speaks her name: *'Mary.'* Jesus' beloved voice is a sound that cuts through her consciousness. Only through hearing does she truly see. Now Mary knows Him and rushes towards Jesus. *'Teacher'* she calls! And then another extraordinary thing happens - Jesus stops her from embracing Him.



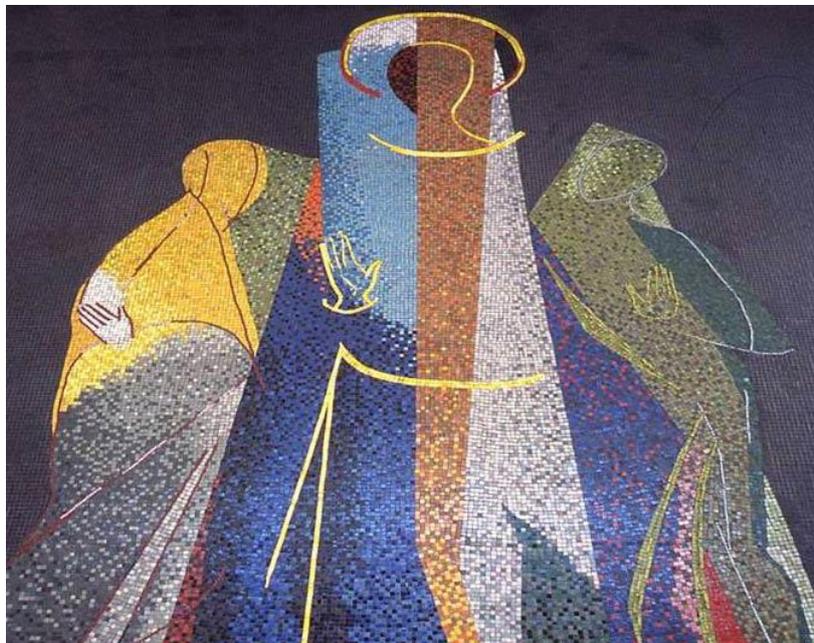
'Do not touch me!' Jesus says, *'but go to my brothers and tell them 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father; to my God and your God.'* Jesus is clear - He has not come back from the dead in order to continue His old life just as it was. Mary can't have what is past. Jesus is calling her to see Him in a new way. She cannot cling on to Jesus as before. Mary Magdalene, an unseen woman, is the first to learn that the new life of Jesus is not just for His chosen disciples and friends, but for *everyone* as she becomes the first evangelist to tell out the Good News of the Resurrection.

In the coming days, Mary is not alone in failing to recognise Jesus. There will follow a series of meetings between Jesus and His followers on the road to Emmaus; by the shore at Galilee; in the Upper Room. In these meetings with our Risen Lord, the disciples are learning that the Resurrection is all about embracing New Life, not clinging on to the past. For Mary Magdalene, it was Jesus' voice - for others it is the sharing of food. For each of Jesus' disciples there is a particular, familiar, unique sense which triggers their recognition of Jesus. And then there is the need for them to witness, to share what they have experienced – so that we too might see Him!

Just as the pregnant Mary needed to share her angelic birth experience with Elizabeth to somehow normalise the enormity of what was to come, so the disciples needed to share their Resurrection experiences in order to reinforce the verity of God's presence in their lives: so many extraordinary things for them to share and understand. For us, the pain of Lockdown prohibits us from sharing our Easter worship as we long to do.

At this stage in our Easter journey, I suspect I am not alone in taking comfort from Mary's difficulty in seeing Jesus. Whilst some people witness to a clear, momentous revelation of Jesus in their lives, for many, it takes time - sometimes a whole lifetime, to realise Jesus' presence in our lives. The counterpoint of the two Marys at either end of Jesus' earthly life is a tangible expression of God's understanding of our struggles and our natures. These encounters remind us that Jesus sees us and meets us where we are: that He is with us even at times when we don't recognise His presence, particularly in this Coronavirus epidemic when Christ is working in and through us all.

Mary Magdalene's encounter at the empty tomb reveals that in receiving the Risen Lord into our lives we too will be uniquely transformed in Christ's Resurrection body. Every time we trust and share and rejoice in Him, we deepen our vision of the eternal life we are promised through His love. And every time we tell others about Jesus - every time we do something that witnesses to Jesus' presence in our lives, then we will feel close to Jesus again.



Responding to one another with compassion and love draws us all to the truth of Easter, whether we can touch each other or not. And when people ask us *'Where is the Risen Christ in this Coronavirus pandemic?'* We can answer: *'He is in us all!!!'*

As we see the Risen Christ, let us trust Him to Easter in us. On this extraordinary Easter Day, may we flourish in the vision of His New Life and share Him in the same compassionate, self-emptying way in which Jesus first loved us! To paraphrase Muir:

See, we have come together, see,
While the destroying minutes flow,
How each reflects the other's face
Till heaven in yours and earth in mine
Shine steady there.

**We are an Easter People, and our song is Alleluia!
Happy Easter!**



***Easter Garden and the Empty Cross by Lucas Poltorak, age 3
with a little help from his mummy, Ellie, in Littleton***

This comes with my thanks to all the gifted contributors to this Easter Day Newsletter, with particular thanks to our Benefice Administrator, Caroline McAulay, who has been working extra hard during this time of Lockdown – particularly putting out my Newsletters at all sorts of times of day and night because I am a very slow writer! She has been volunteering to come in every morning during the Easter Triduum to update our website with daily readings and prayers and is the unsung heroine of our Benefice!

I am going to take the next couple of days off to experience Lockdown for myself as I'm getting worried that my sock drawer is nowhere near as tidy as all of yours must be by now! Be assured of my prayers and love for you all.

Stay home. Stay safe. Stay well. Stay in Christ.

Yours, in Easter joy!

Jax

Revd Jax Machin, Rector, The Downs Benefice

Prayer for Easter Day

by Carolyn Morrissey, Reception Class Teacher at Sparsholt Primary School

Easter Love By C.M-L April 2020

You wouldn't have believed me if I told you.

No one was ready for what was to come.

Lose your freedom to save others,
give us this day our kingdom come.

Like a shadow it swept across the nations.
Darkness fell on the old and sick.

The sign of the cross we recall your stations.
But no one expected or predicted it!

Jesus gave his life to save us.
The cities cry out from London to Rome.
To save your sisters and your brothers
we all must stay safe and stay at home.

Into holy week we enter,
on Good Friday you gave your life.
As a world we must pray together
but stay apart is our sacrifice.
On Easter Sunday we will celebrate your resurrection,
reunited up above.

We live in hope and faith before you
and thank you for such an act of love.