

Looking For Jesus (Easter Sunday)

by Rev. Robert Griffith

When is the last time you were dumbfounded - I mean left seriously speechless ... gob smacked ... where there were no words to express your emotion? Perhaps it was during the mixed thrill and terror of a lightning bolt striking the ground or tree nearby... or standing by the sea and watching the waves crash over the rocks ... It could have been at the birth of a baby or at a great concert.

People have been moved by the sight of a butterfly breaking from its cocoon - and equally dumbstruck by witnessing a horrible accident. Sometimes an experience is just beyond words. Well this is the picture that Mark paints as he ends his Gospel. Jesus does not appear. There is only the empty tomb, and it inspires not faith, but fear and amazement. Instead of joy, there is trembling. Overcome and overwhelmed... the women are silent.

This is a disturbing way for Mark to end his story of the resurrection, so disturbing that some in the early church believed that Mark's ending was truncated - the last page must have been lost. So two different endings to 'finish' the story were added later in some translations, which are verses 9-20 of chapter 16. But today's scholars are convinced that verse 8 of chapter 16 is precisely where Mark intended to end his gospel account. Certainly it's consistent with Mark's portrayal of the disciples as always missing the point throughout Jesus' ministry. More significantly, it also points to how new life may be waiting for us even when we are not yet able to grasp it.

Consider the women. These faithful ones could hardly wait for the Saturday Sabbath to be over. At dawn they went shopping for burial spices and proceeded to the tomb. They were nervous, apprehensive - that stone was so huge. They were distressed, shaken and sad, overcome with grief. As they approached, they saw that the huge rock had already been moved. Inside they found a stunning young man, calmly sitting there. "*Don't be afraid,*" he said, as he gave them Jesus' forwarding address! He's gone to Galilee. It's not surprising that the women were stunned - desperately afraid, and disbelieving ... something had gone wrong (or maybe, something had gone so right that they just couldn't take it in).

This is where Mark left the story - with the men too afraid to come and the women too astounded to speak. Did they miss the point one more time? Or did they get the point? Do you think they understood? God's absence can be easier than God's presence. In some ways, just like the disciples, we can be afraid of Easter. We know how to deal with dead Saviours. We honour them with perfumes and spices so that we can return to the sanity and predictability of our normal lives. We want to remember the past with awe, but we prefer that our present is not unsettled.

Far more terrifying than the crucifixion is the prospect of a resurrection that comes with new expectations of us. Far more terrifying is the revelation that we are called to give 'our everything and our all' to God in Christ. Far more terrifying is the call to 'Galilee'. We would rather embalm God in the certainty of our past, entombed and contained in the surroundings of the familiar, than entrust our lives to the transformation of resurrection power.

A dead God can be safely approached, and honoured at any distance. A Living God, however, may explode into our present and wreak the havoc of life-changing, world-changing transformation! All aspects of our faith are easier when they do not change.

The message of the cross is simple when we observe Jesus, nailed and immobile. It becomes complex when Jesus comes out of the tomb, on the loose, with places to go and people to see and calls to issue.

If the Church really believed the message of Easter, ushers would pass out life vests, crash helmets and safety harnesses instead of newsletters and orders of service. What if the Living God should actually appear here in our midst on this Resurrection Sunday and invite us to give "our everything and our all?"

Perhaps that is what the women feared ... they loved him ... they mourned him ... yet, confronted with the reality of his resurrection, they feared to follow. The women's silence leaves us on that note of irony, summing up the whole story. What has God done? Everything. What have we done in return? Nothing. We are challenged to change that.

Did Jesus rise from the dead? Did he show himself to the world? The other gospel writers say yes. They document some of those appearances - in the garden, on the road to Emmaus, at the seashore in Galilee, in a locked upper room. There is no question that he rose from the dead. However, Mark did not feel the need to document these accounts. Perhaps he felt that the experience of the Risen Christ was a personal one, one beyond words, beyond explanation.

Resurrection is a conversion to believing the unbelievable. Resurrection is not in the seeing but in the faith, in the living as if it's true, even when it's not fashionable or popular. I guess that's why in many ways I can relate to Mark's account of the resurrection more than the other gospel writers because I am called to believe in the resurrection without seeing the body of the risen Lord. Those women at the tomb were faced with the choice to believe Jesus had risen without seeing him with their eyes.

I believe it was at that moment that they were challenged to believe without having seen Him in His resurrected form .. just as you and I and the billions of God's children who followed in the years after these amazing events. We may not have seen Jesus with our eyes, but we can see Him in our lives and in the lives of other people. Have you met a person who reflects Jesus? How does your own life reflect Jesus?

Christianity is not an agreed-upon set of conclusions about what God has done. It is not dogma or doctrine. Christianity is a response. It's not an armchair religion of the mind ... but rather a moment by moment encounter with a living God as we travel the exciting, though rocky, road of discipleship. At Easter we are met by a living, free, risen God, and this can be a bit frightening. For it means that our God will not be locked into the past, will not be imprisoned in history or within our limited notions of what God can or cannot do.

If Jesus rose from the dead, then He rose right into our lives – here and now. The risen Lord is not trapped in the pages of history ... He is alive and here today .. in this place ... in our community ... in our homes ... in our lives. We serve a RISEN Saviour who is actually here in our midst.

The question is ... how do we break through our pride, apathy, doubt and fear and follow Christ? How do we break free from our past in order to pursue our future? How do we follow this God, this Christ, this Saviour who claims to be the truth that makes us free? We trust and we follow. We go to Galilee. We don't wait beside the empty tomb, lost in awe and wonder, worshipping an event which has passed into history. We go to Galilee – that is where the work is. Galilee is where Jesus is. Galilee is letting the empty tomb seep through our whole being and into everything we do. We don't need to have seen Jesus to let Jesus work in our life.

The empty tomb is so often seen as the end of the story of Jesus. We sit through the amazing story of His miraculous birth, His powerful life and ministry ... his agonising death and sacrifice and then we breath a sigh of relief as we get the end of the story where the hero rises from the dead and then the credits roll ... the curtains are drawn ... the lights come on and we all leave the theatre with a lump in our throat .. pleased that it all worked out OK in the end.

That's not the end! That's just the introduction! The resurrection is not the end. The empty tomb is not the end of the story! We have been telling it that way for two thousand years and we need to stop it. The empty tomb is actually the *beginning* of the story ... for us, here and now!

The story of the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus is the most fascinating, wonderful and inspiring story you will ever hear or tell ... and I pray we will keep hearing and telling it until we breathe our last breath ... but Jesus' birth, life, death and resurrection were all for a purpose ... a means to a greater end. He came into *our* kingdom in order to fulfil the requirements of God so that He could bring us back into *His* Kingdom ... the Kingdom of heaven ... the kingdom of God .. where our true life, our eternal life begins.

We can remain outside an empty tomb thinking that's the end of the story ... or we can follow the risen Lord into the 'Galilee' of our time ... into the marketplace ... into the world ... a world that desperately needs new life and hope ... as we become part of the life and ministry of Christ in the kingdom of God.

That is a story we get to live here and now ... a story that began where the Easter story finished. In the end, the women at the tomb probably didn't have to say anything. They didn't have to speak words, which would be doubted or dismissed. They wore their experience. They evidenced their conversion. Their experience changed them. And it will change you. "He has been raised... He is not here... he is going ahead of you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you. "

Where is *your* Galilee? We all have our Galilees. Where are you called to meet Jesus? Where is He waiting for you? Don't go looking for the living among the dead. Don't think of Jesus as a dead guru from a bygone era. Don't get stuck in 'Good Friday mode' and never make it to Easter Sunday ... there are countless people who are grateful for Jesus' death, but are yet to embrace His life!

And don't get stuck on Easter Sunday either ... waiting outside an empty tomb when Jesus has gone ... He is not here, He has risen ... He has left the tomb and gone on ahead of you ... into your 'Galilee'. Don't look for Him in the pages of history ... don't look for Him on the dusty streets of Palestine two thousand years ago. Look for Him on the streets of your town. Look for Him in your workplace or neighbourhood. Look for Him in your home. Look for him in your life. The resurrection of Jesus is not the end of His story.

It is the beginning of your story and mine, here and now, as the risen, living Lord Jesus empowers us to show the world why His death and resurrection was necessary - as we enter the market place of life each day, side by side with Jesus, as together, we bring the light and life and hope of the gospel to a dark and hopeless world.

I say again to you all: 'Happy Easter.' And may the fullness of that greeting be your experience and mine, today and always.