

Touching points

Read the passage from John. It is written below.

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.' Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went towards the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' She said to them, 'They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.' When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?' Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.' Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabbouni!' (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, 'Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."'" Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

Notes on the Bible reading

Riding a horse into Jerusalem and entering its Temple is a very bold prophetic sign, indicating that the centrality of a woman in this account is not something that anyone would invent in a world that undervalued the role of women as witnesses. John locates his narrative in real time, during the early hours of 'the first day of the week'. Mary's grief is strong enough to draw her to the place where she can be as close as possible to Jesus' body. She is shocked by what she finds: an obviously disturbed tomb, the body missing, presumed stolen. Two of Jesus' disciples – both men – believe her anxious report and confirm her story by visiting the tomb for themselves. As yet, its emptiness can only mean that the body has been 'taken away'.

Mary's double loss – the companionship of her beloved rabbi, and now his body – is made visible in her inconsolable weeping. Unlike Peter and the other disciple, she stays by the tomb long enough to experience something she hardly expects. She only recognises the figure behind her when he calls her by name, like the good shepherd calling one of his flock (10.14). Jesus is within touching distance, but he resists. 'Do not hold on to me' suggests a new kind of relationship. 'Ascending to the Father' through his passion (14.1ff) is the counterpart of the descent of the heavenly 'Word' (1.1-18). This movement of grace will open up Jesus' relationship with the God he calls 'Father'. John's readers know what this means: the coming of the Spirit to friends who live by the 'new commandment' that makes the love of Jesus visible (13.34ff; 14.15ff; 15.12ff; 20.19ff). The foundation of this transforming vision is the astonishing witness of a woman.

Reflection

Spend a few moments thinking about what stands out for you from the Bible reading. This idea may help.

Many things offer a 'touching point' with something mysterious that seems beyond the normal parameters of life: e.g. art, music, poetry, science and nature. However, we don't all 'get' these things. Perhaps you have had the experience of trying to explain your enthusiasms to someone and being met with a blank look. Or being the one who gave the blank look! Sometimes you can get past this by helping someone else to experience what enthuses you. Experience can do what words can't. It was the experience of the empty tomb, and then the risen Jesus, that provided a touching place with mystery – the possibility that existence is far bigger than Mary had thought. What achieves that for us today?

Questions for reflection

- How does this painting of a cave convey a sense of mystery'?
- How would you describe the mystery of Easter?
- What does entering into the mystery of Easter mean to you?

Prayer

A prayer for all ages

Lord Jesus,
thank you for promising to be with us always.
Help us to remember that promise
when we don't feel brave enough to be your
disciples.
Help us to remember that the first people to
know
that you rose from the tomb
were ordinary people like us,
women and men who didn't feel very brave.
Give us courage to believe and to tell others –
as Mary did – this Easter and always.
Amen.

A prayer to end the Bible study

God of new life and new beginnings,
we have been drawn here today
to encounter again the mysterious story of life everlasting.
Help us, like Mary, to stay close to this mystery,
to embrace our emotions,
to hear you when you call us by name,
and to experience new wonders.
Amen.

