

EASTER SUNDAY, 1 APRIL 2018

SERMON GIVEN BY MARTYN BERRY

ST MARY'S CHURCH RIVERHEAD WITH DUNTON GREEN

Isiah 25.6-9, Acts 10.34-43, Mark 16.1-8

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

It falls to me to preach the sermon on this glorious morning, an immense privilege - and a challenge. And I had better warn you that my speech is getting slightly slurred.

I will try to channel some of the surprise and joy of the disciples when they realised that Jesus really was alive and the prophecies had come true. Then I want to take a close look at one of the main players in the resurrection event - Mary Magdalene. She is a massively important figure in the history of the church, who was grossly misrepresented by most of western Christianity for nearly 1400 years. (The Eastern Orthodox churches had a much better understanding.) And I want to dump a figurative bucket of custard on the head of Dan Brown - yes, that Dan Brown, of the Da Vinci Code, one of the moderns still wronging Mary. And the same goes for Jesus Christ Superstar. Another film about Mary was released last week. I don't know whether it's any good but it's currently on at the Stag, if anyone cares to try it.

So - let's imagine for a few minutes what it must have been like to be a close disciple of Jesus during the last part of His life as a human. For three years we have followed Him, zig-zagging all over the country. Hard on the feet, it's been. We've seen miracles - dead people brought back to life, the blind restored to sight, the deaf to hearing, the hungry fed and many more, and we have also absorbed His teaching about the Kingdom of Heaven and witnessed His conflicts with the authorities. And now, a week ago, we have seen Him come into Jerusalem riding on a donkey and cheered on by vast crowds. We shared supper with Him, where He behaved rather oddly, and Judas Iscariot even more oddly. We have seen him arrested, tried by a kangaroo court of Jewish high-ups then put in front of the Roman Governor, Pilate, and tortured by his soldiers; and then subjected to the most brutal of all Roman execution methods - crucifixion.

We were all so utterly devastated and horrified that most of us couldn't face being present at his death - and anyway, we were frightened of being arrested as associates of Jesus. It was only His mother Mary, Mary wife of Clopas, Mary Magdalene and John, who stuck it out to the bitter end.

We had lost our beloved leader, our friend and teacher. What on earth could we do now? Talk about the dark night of the soul..... We were lost, totally and completely flattened.

And then - the women came back and said the tomb was empty. Peter and John ran off and found it was so. And then Mary Magdalene said she had met Jesus and He had spoken to her. And then..... two of our colleagues came in and said they had met Jesus on the Emmaus road. And then.....Jesus appeared to us in a locked room. Poor old Thomas missed out and refused to believe

unless he could see and feel Jesus' wounds for himself, so getting the nickname "Doubting Thomas". And then..... Jesus laid on a special visit and Thomas could do his experiment and proclaim 'My Lord and my God'. And then..... to demonstrate again that He had a real body, Jesus organised a highly successful catch of fish, followed by breakfast on the beach. And so it went on, for a few glorious weeks until Jesus went back to his Father in heaven. But we shall meet him again.

Let's now get back to the present day. We should be in no doubt that the resurrection of Jesus is historical fact. A risen Lord needs, indeed deserves, a risen church, one which is joyful at heart and reflects the energy and light of that huge explosion at the heart of history, the Resurrection. We have been picking our various ways through the debris of that ever since. The atheist German Philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche wrote that he might believe in the Redeemer if that Redeemer's followers looked more redeemed. And Bishop John Pritchard wrote: 'I should like us to be a church which glows in the dark'.

So - we must be full of joy. And life-affirming. The church - us - often seems to those people outside it as negative, even repressive. But Easter Christians, full of the joyful physicality of the risen Christ, should want to get involved, as far as they can, with the whole of life - community, work, nation, and planet. And let's remember that Jesus often offended the religious people of his time, but attracted the marginalised and non-religious. Does the Church today have exactly the opposite effect? Are we all too ready to judge others? Our lives and our message must be rooted in love. Don't ever forget the two great commandments - love God and love your neighbour.

And so to Mary Magdalene. The best book I know about her is Susan Haskins' excellent: *Mary Magdalene: Myth and Metaphor*, which I commend very strongly. This Mary is named 12 times over in the four Gospels. This is more than some of the Apostles, e.g. Thaddeus, aka Judas son of James, who crops up just three times. On one holiday job, when I was in the sixth form, my manager's first name was Thaddeus. I have never come across another Thaddeus and I wonder at his parents' motivation. It may be an example of what Bertie Wooster called 'raw work at the font'! But then, according to the BBC a few weeks ago, of boys born in England last year, not a single Nigel was registered.

Mary Magdalene is recorded as present at the crucifixion and resurrection in all four Gospels. Because Mary was the first person to see the risen Christ, and carry His message to the disciples, she has been called the Apostle to the Apostles.

Mary, or in Aramaic, Marian, was a common name in New Testament times and several Marys are met in the Gospels, notably Jesus' mother, Mary of Bethany - sister to Martha and Lazarus, and of course, Mary Magdalene. She is usually called Mary Magdalene to distinguish her from any other Mary, and also to note her birthplace, Magdala on the Sea of Galilee.

In Luke Ch.8 we read that Mary had been cured of mental illness by Jesus and had become one of the sizeable groups of women who travelled with Jesus and the disciples and who are said by Luke to have supported Jesus' group out of their own means. One of them was the wife of the manager of Herod's household. There is ample evidence that Jesus treated women with respect, indeed as equals, which was not common among men of that time. For example, remember the meeting with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's Well in John Ch.4. In a non-physical way, he loved women as he loved men. Mary has been described as an important disciple, not least, with evidence, in Susan

Haskins' book and her status depended on the confidence which Jesus placed in her. There is no evidence whatever in the Gospels for linking Mary Magdalene with Mary of Bethany, or with the 'sinful woman' in Luke Ch.7, who wiped Jesus' feet with her hair.

Tradition has it that Mary, together with the mother of Jesus, went eventually to Ephesus and died there. If that were the case, one might expect St Paul to mention it in his letter to the Ephesians.

The characterisation, one might say character assassination, of Mary as a very 'loose woman', and identifying her as the woman who anointed Jesus' feet and also as Mary of Bethany, can be blamed on Pope Gregory the Great, who in about AD591 wrote a richly imaginative homily which, I would say, probably tells us more about the Pope's mental state than about anything else. Later on, medieval and renaissance painters and writers completely swallowed Gregory's creation and Mary's image was settled - so far as most of the Roman church and its spin-offs were concerned, for the next nearly 1400 years. Mary was made a saint, but that saint was a composite of Mary with the sinful woman of Luke 7 and Mary of Bethany, and commemorated as such each 22 July. This was only corrected in 1969, when in a revision of the General Roman Catholic Calendar, the comment was made on the July 22 space: 'Today's memorial concerns only St Mary Magdalene.... NOT the sister of St Martha, nor the sinful woman of Luke 7'. Martha was shunted to 29 July.

But the idea of Mary as just the penitent sinner has left an indelible mark in western art, literature and film, and still continues in many minds today.

One terrible consequence of this image of Mary was the Irish Magdalen laundries, founded in 1765 and staffed largely by nuns. They were allegedly to help fallen women, but they became places where not only unmarried mothers but cheeky adolescent girls could be placed by priest or parents and used as slave labour. There were no wages. Some of the girls were as young as 12. And they could be there for life.

In 1993 a mass grave containing the remains of 155 women was found next to a former Magdalen laundry. About 11,000 women and girls during the 20th Century were subjected to this regime -which involved some physical abuse, certainly verbal and spiritual abuse. The last Maggie was closed down only in 1996. The laundries had contracts from the government, armed forces, public utilities and major firms. Cynics said the main reason for closing the Maggies was the invention of the washing machine! And incidentally, it wasn't only the Catholics - there were some Presbyterian Maggies as well.

In 2013, the then Irish prime minister, Enda Kenny, made a state apology and offered compensation to the 650 survivors.

Terrible things can be done by outwardly Christian people, who may sincerely believe that they are acting in Christ's name. Think of European wars through the centuries; many episodes in the Crusades; the slave trade; the burning of people of both sides in Reformation London, Oxford and elsewhere. But we must not dwell too much on said things on this glorious Easter morning.

So - let us perform another act of imagination. We are, each one of us, Mary in front of the empty tomb, weeping at the killing by cruel crucifixion of our beloved master and friend, and now faced with the final indignity of the tomb being robbed of his body. We hear footsteps and turn round. A man who looks like the gardener stands there. We brokenly beg him to tell us where the body is.

And then he quietly speaks - and with an overwhelming shock we recognise that voice - and what he says, quite clearly, is our name. Just that one word - our name.

Imagine what we would feel. Imagine how Mary felt. And then be filled with joy - Easter joy, the joy of the Resurrection.

He calls us by name - we are his

Alleluia! Christ is risen!