

## **SERMON FOR EASTER DAY at 8am | 01.04.18**

**We are so familiar with the various stories in the Gospels of Matthew, Luke and John, of Jesus appearances to a wide range of people after Easter Day. The scenes in the Upper Room, the occasions by the lakeside and that famous encounter with the men walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus are all firmly printed in our minds. What happened after Easter? Jesus appeared to his disciples. Mary Magdalene, Thomas, Peter, James, John and more besides are all recorded as having seen him.**

**So these eight verses in Mark – which may well, originally, have been the very last words in his Gospel account, take us by surprise. *Trembling and bewildered, the woman (that is, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome, the women who were recorded as having been there with Jesus on Good Friday) went out - and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone – because they were afraid. That's it; the end!***

**How odd; how strange that Mark has none of those positive sightings and no great commission as we find at the end of St Matthew's Gospel: *Go and make disciples of all the nations, baptising them and teaching them everything that I have commanded you. And surely I am with you - to the end of the age...***

**Here no one sees Jesus restored to life. And the women are so distraught, they say nothing to anyone.**

**On Wednesday I returned back to Bradford to take the funeral of my old Choir Secretary, Lee Tane. He was 94 and still sufficiently aware - just weeks before his death - to ask his daughter to Google the background to some poetry they both loved. Outwardly, Lee could not have been a more orthodox Anglican: he loved the liturgy and the music and nothing pleased him more than a challenging sermon with plenty of theological content. He was hugely supportive of all that we did to make the Church flourish in that increasingly multi-racial part of West Yorkshire.**

**And yet, in all my conversations with Lee, it became obvious that for him, the chief purpose of religion was not to teach us what to believe but, first and foremost to provide a framework for people to live the kind of life they wanted. Morals don't come from God but from experience: these are the kinds of actions which make most people happy for most of the time.**

**Much of Lee's thinking was derived from the philosopher Don Cupitt, former chaplain to Emmanuel College Cambridge who finally left the Church in 2008. For Cupitt and those attracted to the Sea of Faith approach, the role of Christianity was to provide people with the space to find the 'right scene' for themselves. Life, for Lee, was the ability to find the right role, the right part to play, an ease with oneself which would become the foundation for finding personal fulfillment and happiness.**

**For him and for the Sea of Faith community, 'Church' is not about saying *This is what I believe about God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit – or even life after death or miracles or original sin or any of these things*; even taking communion need not mean that one accepts that Jesus was more than just a very good man. What the Church does is to provide an aesthetic space filled with deeply significant symbolic actions designed to help us understand who we are and what we think. Church services simply provide a common platform for all who want to be good, fulfilled and happy.**

**And for people like Lee, this ending to the Gospel is the most honest. Did the women see Jesus after his death? No. Have we seen Jesus? No. Did they hear Jesus call their names? No. Neither have we. They weren't invited to touch his wounded hands. We haven't touched Jesus' hands either.**

**In the face of all that happened, this strange ending to St Mark's Gospel shows us three women struck dumb. Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome come to us as 'silent sisters'. So traumatized were they by what they found that they simply couldn't find the words to express what was so far beyond their experience. If someone had asked, what did they believe about who or what lies after death – the death they saw so visibly on Calvary's hill just three days before – they would have had nothing to say.**

**And that is the experience of so many. You may remember Bishop David Jenkins the Bishop of Durham who caused a furore thirty years ago when he talked about the absurdity of basing our faith on the literal fact of an empty tomb – a 'conjuring trick with bones'. He wanted to help people understand the Resurrection of Our Lord as something completely other – about the vibrant presence of Jesus in their everyday lives.**

**And that was misunderstood by most people too.**

The trouble with what both Rudolph Bultmann and David Jenkins were feeling for is that they wanted to say that the Resurrection was more to do with the experience of the disciples than with the rising of Jesus. Lee actually met David Jenkins at St Martin's in my time there and I suspect they would have found a lot in common. Lee's whole approach was about internal transformation and the happiness of people.

And yet you and I know that our faith depends absolutely on the physical fact of the Resurrection; as I said at the beginning, the truth that Jesus was seen by so many people. This one event lies at the heart of the Christian faith: without it the whole pack of cards simply vanishes away. As St Paul says with so much passion in I Corinthians 15: *If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then we are misrepresenting God, because we testified that God raised his Son. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins and all those who have died in Christ have perished.*

Thankfully there is more than a glimmer of Resurrection even in Mark – beyond the immediate panic of Jesus' closest female friends when they find the tomb empty. The angel tells them that Jesus is risen – and that they must share this news with Peter and the other disciples. Better still, Jesus has gone ahead to Galilee and they would see him there - as he had promised.

But in St Mark's Gospel that time is in the future: it is there - but not yet. Not today. It would take time for words like 'He is risen' to mean anything. We may have to be patient.

As we give thanks for our ability to say 'Christos anesti' - Christ is risen - we pray for all those for whom this is very much more difficult, those who see through a glass darkly as St Paul describes it.

Pray that those who cannot yet accept the Resurrection story will continue to wrestle with it until, one day they, like Lee, will come to see the truth, face to face.

