

SERMON FOR EASTER DAY | 21.04.2019

Acts 10: 34-43, St John 20: 1-18

When things go wrong, are you as cool as a cucumber or the first to hit the panic button?! In a crisis are you all you all calm and collected or the one to throw off a string of rude words and to run around like a headless chicken?

In today's Gospel each of Jesus' disciples are faced with things they didn't understand. Mary Magdalene sees that Jesus' grave has been disturbed and runs back to Peter and John without further investigation. So they chase off to the burial site and John, who is fitter, outruns Peter, goes into the empty tomb and comes out when he sees that there is no body there. Then Peter comes up and sees the grave clothes lying there but doesn't put two and two together.

It is only when John goes back in again that he starts to remember what Jesus had said would happen and he knows that Jesus has indeed come back to life.

Mary, on the other hand, is still wandering around upset by what she has discovered that she doesn't recognize Jesus when she meets him as few minutes later, assuming he is the gardener.

We can feel for all three of them. When we are faced by difficult events and we don't know what to do for the best we are all likely to panic, to lose our common sense, to blame other people for what has happened and to leap to the wrong conclusions. So this story rings true: it is very much what we might have done at the time if we had been there. None of us like chaos – being at a loss because of what is happening all around us. Crises are genuinely frightening.

Two quick stories of the week: the experience of the young firefighter, talking to journalists after the Notre Dame fire, said that when she was standing in one the west towers watching the roof of the Cathedral burning and then falling into the nave, she really was not sure she was going to get out alive.

And the terrible story of the murder of Lyra McKee in Derry as she took photographs of the riots just before the clock ticked into Good Friday.

One of the most talented young journalists of her generation, she had been delving into the activities of the thugs who describe themselves as the new IRA.

We could easily list 101 events this last week when terrible events have really hit people for six, leaving those involved to wonder just what the world is coming to and whether they will ever get over the shock.

And then. And then Mary stops running around and she meets Jesus – not just meets him but finally recognises him. Just by hearing her name being called she knows it is him. And her confusion begins to change. She is still traumatized and uncertain what to do next. But her panic is gone.

Easter is not just a theory, some idea cooked up a couple of thousand years ago to give Jesus' life a happy ending. Easter is what happens when we find ourselves at our wits end and we meet Jesus, metaphorically coming towards us holding out his arms of love – and giving us a new sense of peace. And it transforms us – and it transforms the situation.

But it nearly always comes after something awful. The political situation in Northern Ireland, twenty years after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, seemed to be slipping out of control. Protestant and Catholic tribalism seemed to be rearing its ugly head once more with people unable to talk together. And yet after Lyra McKee's murder Arlene Foster of the DUP and the Sinn Fein's Michelle O'Neill find it possible to stand side by side in grief and in solidarity with one another.

In Paris the whole community stands alongside the Catholics in mourning the tragic loss of the Cathedral and all pledge their support for the restoration. And the young firefighter talks of her appreciation of what Notre Dame means to her now, having not given it a second thought before.

The story of the Resurrection is the retelling of the essential truth that it takes pain and trauma to make us ready and able to break through our normal lifestyle where we cope as best we can to make life as easy as possible. Jesus shows us how to break through the pain barrier for something better: his Resurrection Peace.