Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

Third Sunday of Easter


14 April 2024

You are witnesses of these things (Luke 24:48)

“One day”, my wife frequently tells me, “we are going to downsize”: to leave the large house where we have lived for nearly 40 years, and in which we brought up our children, for something rather smaller and more manageable. In preparation for this still far-off and probably unlikely event, I’ve been driven to sort out my bookshelves. This may also have something to do with my wife threatening to instigate a one in, one out policy on book purchase. Some books I’ve sent to Oxfam, some I’ve given to students, some have gone straight to recycling (for there is nothing worse than yellowing ancient paperbacks).

But I came across one yellowing paperback which my more youthful hand had inscribed with owner, date and place of purchase: AJF, Leeds, May 1968: “Who Moved the Stone?” by Frank Morison … and I couldn’t throw it out. Because I realised that here I had the beginnings of a sermon about witnesses.

Morison was a lawyer, and in his book, with legalistic precision, he “examines the witnesses”. He seeks to interrogate the evidence, albeit at 2000 years removed, of Peter the principal fisherman and most unlikely leader of the nascent church, of James, the brother of Jesus, who was initially fundamentally opposed, but threw in his lot with the Christians and ultimately perished for the cause, the gospel writers with their differing perspectives but fundamental agreements, and of Paul, who as Saul of Tarsus and backed by the full power of the state set out to crush the Christian movement, and was himself engulfed by it. All witnesses to a transformational life-changing event.

I don’t know if you have ever been a witness to a life-changing event? Such witnesses can go through a range of emotions: incredulity and astonishment, trauma and terror, despair and disbelief. Nearly 60 years ago, I was learning to drive in Leeds with my driving instructor alongside. A boy racer, getting tired of my somewhat sedate progress behind the double decker bus in front of me, decided he would overtake me and it on a blind bend, and then crashed head on into a car coming the other way. I was astonished and incredulous at the idiocy of the manoeuvre, I was traumatised by its consequences, I could not believe, let alone process or make sense of what I had witnessed. Yet I was called to testify as a witness at his trial.

The disciples were similarly in a state of incredulity and astonishment yet they too, and especially Peter in his preaching to the crowds (as we have heard in our reading from Acts), were also called upon to testify, to testify to something even more astonishing and apparently unbelievable, to proclaim that the healing, empowering love of God can frustrate the plots of evil men, but yet can stand ready to forgive them, can fulfil the prophecies of a Suffering Messiah by raising him to new life in triumph, can transform startled incredulity and disbelief into faith-full worship. As Peter confidently testifies: “To this, we are witnesses”.

When Jesus, as recorded in our gospel reading, appears to his disciples, they are understandably terrified and traumatised. Their first response is that they are seeing an apparition, a ghost. But to assuage their terror, Jesus does two things. He offers his hands and his feet to be carefully examined, and he eats a piece of fish in their presence. Actions which are clearly designed to dispel any notion that the Risen Jesus is only a figment of their overwrought imaginations, just a psychological summoning of an intense wish-fulfilment.

The examination of his hands and his feet, the observation of his eating do not however erase all the doubts that linger. So Jesus takes a second initiative: he recalls for them the words spoken during his
earthly ministry, of how everything written about him in the scriptures had to be fulfilled, and then he interprets the scriptures again so that they can understand that all that has happened was designed to bring to fruition God’s plans and purposes.

Yet there is one more initiative from Jesus, which is to spell out the mission that lies ahead for the disciples. All the ingredients are laid bare: the preaching of repentance, the forgiveness of sins, the proclamation to the nations, the disciples called upon to testify as “witnesses of these things”.

But in all these witnesses to these things, there is one key witness characteristically missing from Paul’s list, omitted for prevailing patriarchal reasons: Mary Magdalene, who went to the tomb that first Easter morning, who saw and spoke with the Risen Lord, who ran to tell the disciples: the first on the scene, the first witness to it all.

There is something particularly fitting that it was Mary Magdalene, a woman, allegedly a prostitute, certainly the least of Jewish society, who was in fact the first to experience the good news of the resurrection. She had been there at the Cross, faithful to the end; She had been there when the body was laid in the tomb, grieving to the last; She had gone at no small personal risk to herself, to carry out the ritual anointing. And now she is there at the Resurrection: the first person in the world to be greeted by the empty tomb and the Risen Christ.

In my copy of Morison’s book I serendipitously found a bookmark, a postcard of the statue in Florence by Donizetti, of Mary Magdalene. In a BBC4 TV series “Renaissance Unchained”, the art critic Waldemar Januszczak described Mary Magdalene as “the simpering and sorrowful archetypal woman that Venetian painters loved to depict”. Not so for Donizetti: his Magdalene is anguished yet prayerful, gaunt yet powerful, crushed yet courageous.

It took courage to set off in the dark for the tomb that first Easter morning: a journey she must have feared would be useless, for she knew a great boulder blocked the entrance, she knew there were guards around the tomb who would not take kindly to her presence, who would prevent her passage at best, or at worst abuse her. On the face of it, her chance of doing anything useful was vanishingly small. But she didn’t turn back, she didn’t say what’s the point, she didn’t despair: and she found the stone rolled away, the guards disappeared, the body gone.

Morison calls “the moving of the stone” the crux of the resurrection problem. But after 200 pages of evidence and analysis, he sums up that something certainly had happened … but at this distance and by the application of rational lawyerly thought, it was impossible to say what that ‘something’ was.

But whatever it was, it was a force that could move stones from tombs; ~ a force that could bring Paul to his knees on the Damascus Road; ~ a force that could bring peace to grieving disciples in the Upper Room; ~ a force that could empower Peter to speak out to the crowds at Pentecost; ~ a force that could change James from cynical unbeliever to fervent follower; ~ a force that could take Mary Magdalene’s gaunt grief and turn it into joy.

As with them, so with us, and to all who are called to be witnesses to the transforming power of resurrection. We are witnesses to the fact that it is to people facing up to the darkness that the resurrection brings hope. We are witnesses to the fact that the liberation message of resurrection comes first to those who are suffering and struggling, to the downtrodden and dispossessed. We are witnesses to the fact that God’s transforming, resurrecting love in Christ can make all things new.