

Easter Morning homily 2021

It's obvious to us all that we gather for Mass a little differently this morning. It's an unusual setting for us, being outside on this Easter day. And behind the altar, we have a representation of the empty tomb of Jesus. I'm very grateful to everyone in our primary school who helped to make this: to Mrs Charnley, who enthusiastically embraced the project at short notice; to Mrs Donaldson and her husband, who built the frame and came this morning to install it; and to all the children in school who helped to make the 'rock' and to paint it. Surrounding the tomb and the sanctuary here are beautiful flowers, skilfully and lovingly arranged by a small team of talented parishioners. And so today we find ourselves exactly where the women, Peter and John are in the Gospel: we are at the empty tomb. We are in the garden of the resurrection.

Every year on Easter morning we hear this Gospel. It tells us, perhaps strangely, of an *absence*. The women go to look for Jesus, but cannot find Him. His Body has disappeared. Mary assumes it has been stolen: "They have taken my Lord away", she says, "and we don't know where they have put Him." If we were to read on a few more verses in the Gospel, to the passage we'll hear at Mass on Tuesday, we'd discover that Mary stayed by the tomb, weeping over this absence, after the others had left. And there, she saw Jesus. The absence of a body gave way to the presence of the risen Lord, who stood before her. That same change happens here. Absence gives way to presence: as we celebrate Mass at the 'empty tomb' this morning, the risen Lord Himself comes amongst us. He comes amongst us in our gathering; He comes to us in His Word, proclaimed to this assembly and to the passers-by on Sharoe Green Lane; He will soon come amongst us in the form of bread and wine in the Eucharist.

All around us there are signs of life: the beautiful flowers surrounding the sanctuary, the new leaves emerging on the trees, the singing of the birds: at this empty tomb, new life springs forth. And here, just outside the tomb, stands the Paschal candle – the symbol of Jesus, risen from the dead. The risen Lord Himself stands among us, visible with the eyes of faith.

This faith was the gift given to St John, the Beloved Disciple, when he entered the tomb: "He saw and he believed", we are told. He and Peter both hear the news of the empty tomb at the same time. John runs faster. We know he was a younger man, but perhaps there is also symbolism here. The beloved disciple, the one most fully motivated by love, will always reach the Lord first. But John does not enter the tomb: in deference, he waits until Peter, the leader of the

Apostles, has entered. They see the burial cloths lying there; this is clear evidence that the body has not been stolen - no thief would take the trouble to remove the cloths and even to roll up the cloth that had been over Jesus' head. Peter cannot make sense of the scene, but John can. "He saw and he believed." John had stood at the foot of the cross as Jesus died; Peter, as we know, had denied Christ and distanced himself from the Lord, to save his own life. Perhaps the faithfulness of John prepared him for this moment, opening his heart to faith in the risen Lord.

"He saw and he believed." Actually, the Greek text of the Gospel can also be translated, "He saw and he *began* to believe." It may seem like a subtle difference, but it's an important one. Faith can only *begin* at the empty tomb: it cannot end here. Absence must become presence. Today the Church holds before us this image of the empty tomb as a clear sign that Jesus is alive: His grave is empty, and He is alive today! We do not see Him, but now that we see the sign that He is risen, we can open our hearts more deeply to faith, allowing Him to make Himself known to us. The empty tomb is an invitation to believe, to begin a journey of faith in the risen Lord.

Jesus' empty tomb teaches us that God will redeem the whole person: it is not just the soul of Jesus which lives for ever, but His Body too. When we renew our baptismal promises in a moment, we will profess that we believe in "the resurrection of the body" – not just His Body, but our bodies too. God redeems us completely; our bodies, as well as our souls, will live for ever. But today is not only about this hope of future resurrection, whether that be near or in the distant future; it's also about the truth that Jesus is risen today. The absence of His Body invites us to make a journey of faith; a journey to discover of His presence. We too are disciples of Jesus, beloved of Him. We too are invited to see and to believe. And this believing is not merely proclaiming faith, but entering into a relationship of love with the Lord who has died for us and is risen. The Lord who was buried, but whose tomb is empty. The risen Lord Jesus, who lives today.

Fr Andrew

