

Hinde Street Methodist Church
Sunday 5th April 2015 11am

Isaiah 25: 6-9

Mark 16.1-8

"...they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." They said nothing. They said nothing to anyone. There was silence... .. Silence feels like a huge anticlimax. After the rising emotions of Holy Week, the solemnity of Good Friday and the long waiting of Holy Saturday, we long for something different, because we imagine resurrection to be dramatic, less uncomfortable, and more certain. And we're not alone. The early church thought the same. So they added more. The first added addition says the women told Peter and the disciples what they'd seen and heard. And the second includes several stories about Jesus appearing to the disciples before his ascension. But I think they – and we if we insist that silence cannot be an ending – miss the point. Resurrection is not easy. It demands a letting go. A letting go of current preoccupations. A letting go of all expectations and imaginings about the future. And a letting go of fear. If you think that sounds as if resurrection is letting go, of pretty much everything, you're right. So it's no wonder the women were silent. Which of us wouldn't be? And yet it's the silence, the silence entered as they fled in terror and amazement, which enables them to let go. For in that silence, they were touching the heart of God, and it is from there that resurrection springs.

When Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome – three of the women who'd provided for him in Galilee and followed him to Jerusalem - set out to anoint Jesus, all they'd thought of, was offering him the ritual care he'd have received had the Sabbath not prevented them. So they'd waited a day before going. And then set out, bought spices and as they'd walked to the tomb, wondered who would roll the stone away. They were so focused on their task that they couldn't see any further. Anointing Jesus kept their minds, their hearts and their hands occupied. It relieved them from wondering about the future that looked desolate. Everything they'd hoped for, everything they'd imagined it would become with Jesus was gone, there was nothing. All that was left was, to care for his needs in death, as they'd done while he was in Galilee. But when they arrive at the tomb, their life is shattered. Not just once, or even twice, but three times. The stone has been rolled away. Jesus has gone. And they are told to tell the disciples and Peter. It's these three moments that help us to understand what we need to let go of – or open ourselves to letting go of - in order to experience resurrection.

The first letting go is the letting go of our current preoccupations. The things we do to occupy our minds, hearts and hands, for fear of what we might find, or what might happen, if we stop. We get the first clue about what this is for these women as they walk to the tomb. *"Who will roll away the stone from the entrance to the tomb?"* When they arrive, the stone - which Mark says was very large - is not blocking the entrance, but has been rolled away. I'm amazed they didn't run away immediately. Something extraordinary had happened. Large stones don't just get rolled away. But their desire to care for Jesus properly – after all it's all they've imaged – was great. And maybe the surprise was enough to overcome their fear. Or perhaps it's the numbness that is the beginning of the grief. Whatever it was they go in. They go into the tomb.

Tombs are a source of powerful imagery in every culture. And among the Hebrew people they underpinned the idea of Sheol. In the Hebrew Scriptures, Sheol was the final destination, of all living things. It was an actual place in the cosmic structure. A place where people lived lives of such low quality, that they could hardly be described as life, but more of a half-life. It was dark, silent, and numb. A place from which there is no return, with no joy, no memory where people were forgotten by God. It was literally a dead-end. Today's reading from Isaiah uses the image of Sheol to describe the world when God seems to be absent. *"...the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations"*.

I catch glimpses of feelings like these among members and ministers of declining churches. And since we are one it makes me wonder what we are feeling now. I sense there may still be some numbness

and perhaps even denial. But the majority of us have faced up to reality that we are a declining church. For one that has been large, one of the “big three” in Central London, that’s hard to acknowledge. And once numbness wears off, it brings anger, guilt, uncertainty, confusion, bitterness, hostility and resentment. These feelings come suddenly or emerge gradually over time. Some express them through blame. Others succumb to a sense of depression. What about you? Are you reluctant to recognise what’s happening? Or have you accepted the fact and now struggle with your feelings about what it means to belong to a declining church? When the women entered the tomb - something they hadn’t really thought about doing when they set off - they take the first step towards resurrection. They let go of their worries about the stone. And that allows them to let go of the things they’ve allowed to occupy them to avoid dealing with the reality of Jesus’ death. As they enter the place of darkness, of grief and pain, they face the half-life, the place of fear, and the sense of God-forsakenness Jesus’ death has led them into. Only to discover that it is none of these things Will we? As long as we avoid facing up to the reality of our situation, succumb to depression or speak about it in ways that seek to apportion blame, we are trapped. We’re trapped by the stone. It’s in front of it. It has not been rolled away. We need to let go...

The second letting go is the letting go of our imagination about what the future will look like, so that our hands are open enough, to embrace a new one. It’s disturbing, because accepting that the future is unknown is deeply counter-cultural. We’re expected to have dreams, visions, and expectations. Yet this is what the angel the women meet invites them to do. And the clue comes when the women walk into the tomb. Instead of finding Jesus, they find a young man, an angel who tells them *“Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified ...has been raised; he is not here... go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.”* They realise that they cannot do what they’d come to do. The future they’d seen when they’d set out early that morning is unravelling. There’s nothing to occupy them. All their expectations and imaginings about the future are shattered. I suspect they’d thought that after a grieving-time they’d go back to Galilee, and pick up where they’d left off, before Jesus had changed their lives. Maybe for a while, they’ll have met up to remember him, they’d talk about the past and wonder what the future would have been had he lived. They’ll have shared food, tears, laughter, memories of what he’d said and the things they’d done together. But in time, as they learnt to live without him, they’ll have let go of their dreams about what the future might have been, and a different future will have emerged.

Instead of this, the angel tells them Jesus has been raised, and they’re to go and meet him in Galilee. Galilee was where they’d first met Jesus. Where they’d first glimpsed what Isaiah’s picture of - *“a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear”* - might mean in the feeding of the 5000 and his teaching about banquets. They’d been so inspired that they’d left their homes to provide for him and his disciples. Yet Galilee was also where, as he’d healed the sick, cast out demons and taught, they’d begun to glimpse his power and to see how the religious authorities responded to it. He’d only begin to talk about how he would *“undergo great suffering, and be rejected...and killed”* as they’d set out on the journey to Jerusalem. But it was events in Galilee that had precipitated what had unfolded in the past days in Jerusalem. So by telling them to go back to Galilee the angel was inviting them to embrace the life Jesus had lived, a life that might lead, to the death he’d died.

I wonder what this might look like for us. We can carry on as usual, continuing to care for homeless people and hoping that students and young adults will want to join us as we are. To do this is to allow our history – our past - to shape us. And our expectations of ourselves and those who haven’t yet joined us will be informed by them. We can choose it, there’s nothing wrong with it, if we also allow for the fact that neither homeless people nor students and young adults are the same as they were when we began this work. But as long as we only see through eyes shaped by the past, we will not see, what new there is to see. The alternative is to heed the angel’s call to “go back to Galilee”. But what does it mean for us. It isn’t a new suggestion for Hinde Street. The Easter before I came, I heard that Ken Howcroft began his sermon, by asking you what you were doing here. If you were being true to the Gospel, he said you’d be at home or in the streets and not here. I gather that the next week Leao Neto challenged him and said church was the right place to be on Easter Day. Neither was wrong, but I think Ken was closer to the angel’s words, “You’re

looking for Jesus? Sorry you've just missed him!" For Jesus is never where we look. He's always gone ahead. And he's gone is Galilee. The places we live, our homes, our places of work or study, or leisure. These are the places God invites us to live out our faith. It's not that church isn't important. Church, the community of the faithful, resources us live as faithful disciples in those places. And God knows we'd need it, because in those places, we'll face apathy, hostility, and, indifference. So what would this church be like if we allowed experiences of living and sharing faith in our everyday lives – 7 days a week - to shape our lives instead of our history?! Of course, we cannot know, but Jesus' resurrection faced the women with a future that was different from the one they'd expected and imagined. So the second letting go, is to let go of our imagination about what the future will look like, so that our hands are open enough to embrace a new one. It's not comfortable, because at first, we'll have to live with not knowing what that new one might look like. And this is what the angel was inviting the women to do. Because it is true to Jesus' life, his teaching, to who he has invited them to become. No wonder they are afraid and run away. Will we do the same as them? It isn't wrong to be a declining church, to remain as we are, offering what we do and are to those who want it. Yet today's Gospel invites us to follow to where Jesus is. And if it's in Galilee, he'll be waiting for us in our homes, our places of work, among those we relax and volunteer with. Until we face up to this possibility, our hands are firmly closed, and we've decided on our future. We need to let go...

Everyone who reads the Gospel knows that the women did eventually tell the story. So they must have embraced the third letting go. The letting go of their fear that allowed them to speak. The story doesn't tell us how this happened 'though. At least it doesn't tell us in words. And I think this is where the silence that follows the words comes in. Mark concludes his Gospel with these words, "*they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.*" They said nothing. Their saying nothing should silence us too, but while past generations would have understood, because ours does not it is necessary to speak. Maggie Ross, an Anglican solitary, explores the idea of lost silence. She says that as the world has become increasingly industrialized, we've been limited by the linear, two-dimensional analysis of our self-conscious mind. And lost touch with the dynamic, connexional, holistic life of our deep mind that is comfortable with silence. Both are necessary for living life well. But without the deep mind we simply react to the noise around us. She sees silence as the beginning of a recovery – resurrection - for as we are "*energized by the upwelling from deep silence where... our shared nature with God becomes known.*" (p15) She goes onto talk about "the work of silence", but says the word "work" is misleading, because the only effort involved is to "*relax into letting go ... to choose to be still, to allow the noise to fall away, to be receptive, and... to 'ungrasp' so that we can be 'grasped'.*" (p23)

This "ungrasp" so we can be "grasped" is the third moment of resurrection. It happened when the women took the risk of letting go of their fear that if they spoke, some dreadful, unimaginable event might be unleashed. When they allow what they'd heard from the angel to sink in. And become open to the visions of a changed world, of the resurrection only hinted at in the Hebrew Scriptures. For not only would God make a feast for all nations, Isaiah tells us, that God will also destroy Sheol so that there is no longer a place for it within the cosmic structure. God promises to "*swallow up death forever ... wipe away the tears from all faces and take away the disgrace of his people from all the earth.*" When the women eventually let go of the anxiety and fear about speaking, they tell Peter and the disciples what they have seen and heard, and resurrection becomes possible – not only for them – but for the community of Jesus' followers. I don't suppose it removed their uncertainty about what they would do, or their fear of returning to Galilee, but silence would enable that "ungrasping", that "letting go" to continue, because it is doesn't happen all at once.

What might silence, that makes space for ungrasping so we can be grasped by God, look like for us? I have a suspicion that many of us find it hard to use the knowing that comes from our deep minds. In the meditation group, we're finding silence is enriching us as individuals, and as a community. I'm not suggesting everyone should join it, but that as individuals and as a community we seek ways into the silence that enables us to get in touch with the heart of God. It might be singing, painting, walking, or any other passion. Whatever it is, you'll know it, because when you engage in it you'll sense a new and words of life voice rising up. They'll be words that comfort, challenge, and offer different ways of living from the

predominant ones we hear in the media and politics right now, words that encourage others to let go of their fears about opening their lives to the depths of their hearts and minds.

A few weeks ago, I was reading a book, when I came across this.

*Yearning for a new way will not produce it.
Only ending the old way can do that.
You cannot hold onto the old,
all the while declaring
that you want something new.
The old will defy the new;
The old will deny the new;
The old will decry the new.
There is only one way to bring in the new.
You must make room for it.*

It's by Neale Donald Walsch, an American writer, I'd previously dismissed as wacky. He isn't explicit about resurrection, but he manages to speak about it, anyway. "*You cannot hold onto the old,*" he says, "*all the while declaring that you want something new... There is only one way to bring in the new. You must make room for it.*" And making room means letting go. A letting go of current preoccupations. A letting go of all expectations and imaginings about the future. And a letting go of fear. Letting go leads to resurrection. It's not easy. And yet, it's not actually us who does anything, it's God. God moved the stone. God raised Jesus from the dead and send him back to Galilee. And God, at the heart of the silence, of despair, fear, and saying nothing, enables God's people to speak. For it was in silence, that the women touched the heart of God, and knew that Christ was risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

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