

Hinde Street Methodist Church
Sunday 12 April 2020 11.00am ZOOM
Deacon Belinda Letby
EASTER SUNDAY

For most of us our lives have been turned upside down just now. We are living in a time of fear, anxiety, illness, death and grief. We are wary of leaving our homes. Many people have lost their jobs, they have no incomes. And those who are allowed to continue to go out to their work are putting themselves at great risk to do so. People have lost loved ones, friends, family, colleagues.

In the days leading to that first Easter Day, the disciples' world had turned upside down. So many of their hopes had been dashed. Some of them witnessed the beating Jesus had taken, had seen the nails being driven into his hands and feet, had heard him crying out on the cross, had been at the tomb where his body had been placed and had seen the entrance closed with the stone.

And then they shut themselves away inside, away from the world, away from the aftermath. They were afraid to go outside because their own lives were at risk, the possibility of their own deaths was very real. The crucifixion had taken away someone they loved dearly – their leader, their friend, their family.

And then, in the midst of the fear and confusion, Jesus comes to bring about a change.

Mary does not recognise Jesus, her teacher, her friend, the familiar face and presence of her Lord. It may have been quite understandable – she would have been very emotional, in a panic as she searched for the dead body of Jesus. She may not have been able to see clearly through the tears in her eyes.

The Gospel accounts of the risen Christ tell us that when people encounter Jesus, they do not immediately know him. They recognise him as a human being, but not a familiar one. Even the disciples need help.

Often, we struggle to see what is staring us in the face. In our busyness, in our desire to be in control, in our guilt, helplessness and fear and through our tears of sorrow and frustration we can miss an encounter with the living Christ. We can fail to recognise him in our lives, in other people, in the world, in the chaos, in our own response to the situation we find ourselves in right now.

Mary, too struggled to recognise Jesus – she was looking for the human body of Jesus, the one she had last seen hanging on a cross, and so she wasn't expecting to see the risen Christ. She was searching, desperately looking for, the familiar. He stands beside her, yet she doesn't know who he is. He speaks to her, yet she still doesn't know his true identity. The truth, the risen Christ, new life is right in front of her but she is too busy looking for the life she knew, that she was familiar with.

And then Jesus speaks her name and enables her to recognise him, to see who he is, to be able to connect the new life in the risen Christ with the old life.

Those verses from Jeremiah speak of creation, restoration and renewal of God's promise – leading us forward to the new life in the risen Christ. Mary mistakes Jesus for the gardener – or does she? It's not unusual to refer to God as The Gardener, and the imagery in Jeremiah brings that alive – creating life, planting the vineyard, sowing God's people as seeds in the new land.

The risen Christ comes, not just as the truth that there is life after death, not just as the truth that Jesus is still alive and we can know him, but also to tell us the truth that this is the beginning of a new creation, a new promise, a new world. And we are given the opportunity to become God's partners in it, to be assistants to the head gardener in this new creation.

In the resurrection we are invited to recognise a new life, a new way of being, a transformation. In the Risen Christ we are given the connection to our creator, to the one who gives us life, who wants us to share in the true life he offers, to be one with God. Paul writes this to the Colossians, 'your life is now hidden with Christ in God'. God's desire is to share his life with us. Our life is not ours, it is a gift from our creator who, as we are reminded in Jeremiah, 'has loved us with an everlasting love – has drawn us with loving-kindness – and will build us up again'.

I love the image of God drawing us with loving kindness. I can't help thinking that God had a very shaky hand when it was my turn to be drawn! But I console myself with the knowledge that God made nothing in vain, and saw that it was very good.

Each of us has been created for a time and place, for a purpose. That purpose is not always clear to us, and especially as we face the challenges that Covid-19 has brought us. What is our purpose in this season of disconnection with the familiar? What happens when we are able to re-connect?

My hope is that we will not want to return to the old and familiar. We may not have asked to be in this situation but we can take the opportunity to reflect on what we are learning from this experience, and I don't just mean learning how to use Zoom! Although it has to be said that Zoom has been a great gift to us, it has enabled us to gather together, to worship and to support one another. It has opened doors for us to connect with people we hadn't connected with before.

At our Tuesday Meditation Group this week we welcomed 6 people from the Anonymous Groups who usually use our building for their meetings, but have not attended the meditation before. When they normally meet in closed meetings in the building it is a challenge to engage with them. Yet, here we had the privilege of connecting with them and offering them support in these very difficult times. I would like to suggest that Zoom could be used quite creatively in the future even when we are able to gather together again in person. Our congregations over these last few weeks has

more than doubled because people have been given the resources to connect in that way. Why wouldn't we want that to continue?

But there are other things that we can learn from this time I am sure. What is important to us? Who is important to us? What have we missed being able to do? What have we not missed? Who are our nations essential workers? What can we manage without? What have we been able to enjoy doing that we couldn't before? Who or what do we rely on? Where does our support come from? What changes will we make in our life? Lots to ponder on for the future.

And in our ponderings, I suggest we should also consider, on this Easter Day, where we have encountered the risen Christ? Where have we seen new life? Where have we witnessed transformation? Or are we like Mary before her eyes were opened, are we struggling and in a panic because the old life, the familiar has gone.

Mary's eyes were opened though, Jesus didn't leave her floundering, he found a way to help her make the connection, and later on he helped the disciples recognise him in their midst in the house, and Thomas too needed help to believe that the one stood before him was truly Jesus, and then on the road to Emmaus Jesus stayed with Cleopas and his companion and enabled them to see his true identity.

Jesus had been telling his disciples for a while what was going to happen to him, they had heard his words about his death and his rising after 3 days. Yet, their eyes and hearts and minds were fixed on him on the cross, their grief and sorrow blinded them to the truth, and they could see no further. Sometimes, life in general, or a time of suffering, fear and anxiety as we are living through now, can completely overwhelm us so that all we know and trust is forgotten, our faith can be shaken.

But the risen Christ comes to us in our despair and confusion, and spends time with us. He knows our pain and suffering, he knows our confusion, he knows we lack understanding. His presence with us is not dependent on our understanding of him, of his resurrection. Its entirely dependent on him

understanding us, knowing how we are feeling, knowing what's going on in our lives and how that's affecting us.

The risen Christ spends time with his disciples, and he spends time with us, and so Easter, and all that it means comes to them, and to us, through the presence of Christ.

God is always seeking us, wanting a relationship with us, even when we are angry with God, and don't understand why life is as it is – God is there with us.

Mary and the others who first encountered Christ resurrected, did not recognise Jesus. Yet he still stayed with them and enabled them to see his true identity, helping them to understand what was going on, being alongside them through the difficult time.

Christ is all around us - and once we do recognise him we can know the joy of being in the presence of Jesus, we can rejoice when we understand once again the truth of the resurrection, that there is life after suffering, abandonment, sinfulness, pain and sorrow. And Christ Jesus is in our midst, loving us, knowing our pain, offering us new life and transformation and peace.

There's a quote I found in my notes and I can't remember where it came from – 'resurrection does not remove the marks of suffering, but it can transform them, and us'. Our scars – be they physical, emotional, spiritual – will not go away. We will always remember, always have the pain, but something really positive and good and beautiful and new can come from the experience. We can use those experiences in our lives for the good and we can be transformed.

We can be the presence of the risen Christ for others, showing love and care, sharing our experiences and what we have learnt, sharing our faith and speaking of the hope of Easter, that from the ordinary of our lives, from our pain and suffering, transformation and peace can come and we can rejoice and shout from the rooftops: Halleluah! Christ is risen. He is risen indeed! Halleluah! Amen.

