

A Sermon by the Reverend Timothy A. R. Cole

Easter Day (B)



1 April 2018

Back home the Queen spends an annual holiday every year at Balmoral Castle in Scotland. It is a place where she and the Royal family can relax, picnic and go for long walks in the hills with the dogs. - Story has it that the Queen was walking along the street in Crathie, the nearest village to Balmoral one day, when a tourist stopped short in front of her, looked at her intently and said “Do you know you look exactly like the Queen?” To which the Queen is supposed to have replied - “How very reassuring!” before walking on down the street with two corgi dogs in tow.

Recognizing or not recognizing people is sometimes tricky. The tourist could see but couldn’t actually believe what they were seeing.

Context is everything. Speaking of the Queen, when I was 6 or 7 years old, I discovered that she had a very grand house just near where we lived. It had a very long driveway lined with trees with a big black chauffeur driven car and Corgi dogs that yapped around her legs wherever she went. I used to hide in the trees and watch her until she saw me and called me across. She never actually said that she was the Queen, but she very graciously gave me tea and sandwiches in a very grand drawing room before sending me off back down the lane to home. I am not sure how long it took my mother to persuade me that this lady was not in fact the Queen, but just a member of my father’s congregation whose husband was a very successful lawyer, but she must have managed it eventually!

“Saying this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom do you seek?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.”

Why is it that Mary doesn’t recognize the risen Christ?

First she could not recognize him because of her tears. Sorrow leaves us partially blind to much of what is around us. I met a woman once just after I was ordained. She had lost her husband about two years earlier. Grief is a crippling thing, but people, in time, find ways to move on. We don’t forget, but we somehow find life again. She had not. She was completely paralyzed and overwhelmed by her loss. She was so wrapped up in the dark cloud of death that she could not see even a glimmer of the life that stood before her. I don’t know if I might have been able to help her better now but I am afraid I don’t think I could do very much for her then.

Mary’s tears made her unable to see the risen Christ and maybe many of us have been, are or will be in that position too one day. C S Lewis described his relationship with God in grief after losing his wife, as being like “A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence.”

Auden’s powerful poem “Funeral Blues” is devastating in its finality.

The stars are not wanted now; put out every one.

Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun.
Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood.
For nothing now can ever come to any good.

The victory we celebrate today is a real one fought and won over a real enemy. An enemy we have all known. Loss or failure, the temptation to despair, and the resulting shroud of our own tears can leave us under a sky with no stars and locked behind a big black door that makes us unable to see anything - even the risen Christ and the life he brings standing right next to us.

But Mary also couldn't recognize Jesus because she insisted on facing in the wrong direction.

All her attention is on the tomb where his body had lain. All her preoccupation is with the body and where it has been taken. One can almost see her staring distraught and uncomprehending at the empty cave, barely glancing at the stranger who stands behind or to her side.

And we too, can become over occupied with the empty tomb. What happened? How did it happen? Did it really happen? Just as we can become over occupied with the other empty holes in our lives - our losses, our failures, our frustrated hopes and dreams. How did I get here? How did I let it happen?

Every year my mother used to make an Easter Garden for the Church like this one I and the Cole family made yesterday. Hers was much better and more beautiful than our efforts, but even at best, it is not the most exciting of pictures. It's not like the wonderful Christmas Creche that was in its place a few week's ago. It is place of stillness and absence after all.

And there-in lies the heart of the matter. Of course, we will wonder and the world will question how on earth this can be. How can God die and how can earth bound humanity be raised up from death and lifted into heaven?

Well, if there is no God then, of course, it can't be. It's all a nonsense, but, on the other hand, if God is, then of course it can be. It sure though, that we can never know how.

We can, if we wish, stand staring at the empty tomb and puzzle and question and wonder, but the irony is that, while we are doing that, Christ is not there, he is everywhere else! He has gone out to possess the world and to touch the hearts and minds and souls of men and women everywhere. It is only when Mary hears his voice and turns round that she sees him. It is only when we turn round and look for him that we will find him. We reach out our hands at that altar rail to receive him, we open our hearts in prayer to meet him, we search for his words to us in the scriptures and we look for his face in the people around us. How is Christ risen? I do not know. All I know is that I meet him every day in the chapel, at the hospital bed, in the street and in the very new life that rises in mountains, seas and skies and that drips from the Cherry blossom trees outside my house.

Whatever vale of tears that impairs our sight, whatever empty hole in our lives that fills our vision, today, the risen Christ quietly speaks our name and we can see what was right in-front of our eyes all along. The big black door is opened, Auden's clocks ring out in joyous chimes because death is a lifeless finality no more, eternal life has broken in upon the world, and, even more importantly than even that, my cold dead heart and yours are rekindled with a holy fire. Even as this Easter sacrament passes from our hands to our lips and flows into our very veins, the life and light and fire of God, enters us and calls us in this moment. It calls us as individuals and it calls us as a congregation in our Bicentennial year as we reach out to the

next 200 years of Christian witness in this Church It calls us in every moment in fact, until we find its fullness in Christ's Kingdom.

Children - Alleluia! Christ is risen! - He is risen indeed! Alleluia.

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