

Running with good news

Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 28:1-10

There's a lot of running in the Easter story. Mary Magdalen and another Mary, at the Garden tomb, encountering an angel, are told to see the place where Jesus lay, and then go quickly to tell the others; and they ran. In another gospel story Peter and John, having been told by the women, run to the tomb, and no doubt back again, with the news that something had happened. The unbelievable news. The perplexing news. The upsetting news. Maybe, just maybe, the good news.

Whether you are more built for comfort than speed, even if you wanted to in these days of lockdown there's not much running for anyone as we stay indoors, or maybe, if we have them, venture just about as far as our gardens. I've been struck in the past Holy Week how much of the story echoed eerily the present time. Last week many of us shared in the joint services at Greenbank, watching on-line a mixture of limited live participation and more extensive recorded material where we shared music and reading and reflections on the days of that week. I remember on Maundy Thursday watching myself on screen, talking about the foot-washing that preceded the Last Supper, and preparing to share in the Communion on my own. Outside it was 8pm and neighbours had come to their doors to clap and applaud the special people in so many services who have been keeping our country safe and secure and served. Shut away but together, it spoke powerfully of the Upper Room and the service that Jesus performed there for His disciples.

Then on Good Friday, after a funeral, I was shut up once more on my own. Locked in like the disciples, as they were locked away in their upper room and elsewhere, hidden away, fearful of the world outside. I could easily imagine their quiet, furtive, nervous movements, in the shadows on the Friday and then the Saturday.

On the Sunday, the women first creep out. Stealthy movements through the dawn-dark streets, making sure they were unobserved. They reached the outskirts of the city, where the tombs carved in stone were, in a scrubby garden, and found again the place where their friend had been

buried. They'd planned to carry out the funeral rituals and customs of their day – anoint the body. Not thinking how they'd roll away the stone that covered the mouth of the rock tomb where He had been laid.

But He was not there. The visible, public event of the resurrection was not witnessed. It remains a mystery. No one saw the first movement, or whatever actually happened. We have grave clothes; we have a stone rolled away; we have an empty tomb; we have a rumour of angels trying to make sense of what had happened to the women who, at that point, would have been frozen to the spot with fear.

Fear opened their eyes. Perhaps wonder opened them wider as they tried to take in what had happened.

“Go quickly...tell...quickly with fear and great joy...run!”

The two women run, and after running tell the good news to the hidden male disciples. The women are the first evangelists carrying the good news after the resurrection. They are not without fear, but they run, and they tell. Jesus is risen.

“The Easter story is not about is. It is a story of a God Who is not simply love, but love for us, love in action, taking on our battles with sin and death, doing for us that which we could not do for ourselves. Petty, humanistic moralising wilts in the face of omnivorous death. Can it be that there is a force loose in the world stronger than death, more powerful than Caesar's legions or our betrayal and infidelity? Here is a story that defies our tendency to reduce the story merely to pastoral care, as if our greatest need were for comfort and pacification, or to ethics, as if beneficent human action could change the world. This story rises above the merely ethical (what am I to do?) and pushes us into the threateningly theological (what is God doing?)...The most interesting actor is a God Who raises the dead and makes a way when we thought there was no way. This is the new normal. Dare we come to church in the darkness and peer with the women into so great and inexplicable a wonder? The women leave the tomb with 'fear and great joy'.ⁱⁱ And they run to tell the good news.

If you're hoping that I, or anyone, can explain the mystery of resurrection, then you're going to be sorely disappointed. To explain is to control, and neither I, nor anyone else, can control the resurrection story. Easter isn't a story to be reasoned out; Easter isn't a jigsaw that we can put together when we manage to get all the right parts in the right order and in the right place. Easter is a wonder to be experienced, and if we let it, this wonder will change us. It will open us up to believe, even though we can't explain. Which may be frustrating, but no less real.

The Easter story of Jesus' resurrection declares that there is hope beyond death; that there is a time beyond Covid-19; that there is a belief that the doors will open again, and we will be free to share our good news. Easter, this occasion for great doubt for so many, and also the source of the most profound faith. I cannot explain it, but by God I can feel it.

I can't share this good news with you face to face today, but through the high speed of technology, we can still experience it. And as we share in this Easter time, we can feel, really feel, that we are together, with this good news that despite everything, gives us hope even at times like this.

The late American professor and preacher Peter J Gomes recalled a wonderful encounter with the Queen Mother in the summer of 2001. He was attending worship at the parish Church in Windsor Great Park where the royal family attends church when they're at Windsor. After the service he was invited to join the Queen Mother, and the Queen at Royal Lodge. The Queen Mother was in her one hundred and second year, and holding court in the form of a splendid pre-lunch drinks party, like something out of a Merchant Ivory film, or Downton Abbey. The professor was summoned into the royal presence and the Queen Mother said to him how excellent the sermon was. "Don't you agree?" she asked. The professor agreed. Then, with that world-class twinkle in her eye, the Queen Mother remarked, "I do like a bit of good news on Sunday, don't you?"

A bit of good news on Sunday; a bit of good news on Easter. Now that would be something to run with if we could. But since we can't, feel it's love reaching out to you today, with hope, and encouragement, and joy. It's going to be all right. The Lord is risen. He is risen indeed!

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ William H Willimon, Feasting on the Gospels, Matthew, Vol 2, p360