

Christ is Risen! Alleluia
He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

Happy Easter everybody

Today, more than any other, it feels strange not to be able to worship together in one or more of our church buildings. I hope and pray however that in these different and difficult circumstances you will still know experience the joy of Easter, and knowledge that the living Christ is with us and has triumphed over darkness.

Last week, I gave the details of the times at which funerals would be taking place. Thank you to everybody who kept a moment of quiet and prayer at those times; it did make a difference when only a few people can physically be present to know that others were there in spirit, and I know that Roy especially appreciated that when Jill was laid to rest on Thursday. So please add your prayers on these occasions:

Wednesday 15 April 11am David Powell
Friday 17 April 9.30am Paul Beavon
Friday 17 April 4pm Donald Hewitt
Wednesday 22 April 11am Alan Bridgewater
Wednesday 22 April 2pm Ernest Rivers

I hope you've found the reflections helpful, and I'm attaching and copying below an Easter reflection. As ever, don't hesitate to get in touch, with news or for a chat. With every blessing this Easter time.

Alleluia! Christ is Risen.

John

Easter Reading: John 21.1-18

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, 'They have taken my Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.' Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went towards the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' She said to them, 'They have taken my Lord away, and I do not know where they have laid him.' When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?' 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.' Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She said to him, 'Rabbouni!' (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, 'Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."' Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

Reflection for Easter Day

Where will you be spending Easter Day? Most years, that would be a question that would yield a wide range of answers. We're travelling to see the family. We'll be going out for lunch. We're

getting ready to go off on holiday. And, for many of us a central part of Easter Day: we're going to church.

But this of course is not "most years". The available responses are far fewer. Our particular thoughts and prayers are with those for whom the answer to the question, "Where will you be spending Easter Day?" is "In hospital", whether that be as a giver or a receiver of vital care. But for most of us the answer is simple. Where will you be spending Easter Day? At home. At home, and if we're lucky enough to have one, and the weather stays as forecast, in the garden.

Whilst I for one am missing the opportunity to gather in church for Easter Communion, there are worse places to spend Easter Day than in the garden. I know how fortunate I am to be living in a Vicarage with a sizeable garden, and I feel for those facing lockdown in accommodation that does not allow for such a space. A garden is a blessing and a gift. I'm not sure I'd go quite as far as the writer of the famous verse, "You are nearer God's heart in a garden than any other place on earth", but I can see the point. And certainly at Easter a garden is a very fitting place to be as we remember and celebrate the events of that first Easter Day.

At the end of his account of the death of Jesus on Good Friday, St John tells us, "Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid." It is perhaps from this that we get the custom of fashioning an Easter Garden. Most years, these have been made and found in our churches. But this is not most years. Congratulations to those who rose to the challenge of making your own Easter Garden, and I hope it has helped you in your devotions over Holy Week.

Gardens are a sign and a celebration of life. The beauty and colour of the plants, and the habitat that is provided for animals, all help us to appreciate the beauty and goodness of the world that God has created. But as the Gospel writer tells us, in the garden there is a tomb. It is the harsh reminder of the presence and reality of death; a reality which our generation in the western world has often sought to deny, or push to the edges of our thoughts. The grim and rising death toll from the coronavirus outbreak has changed all that. We are no longer in any additional need of the reminder that we received on Ash Wednesday of our human frailty and mortality.

But today, on Easter Day, we rejoice that the garden is again a symbol of life. There is a tomb in the garden, but it is empty. The stone has been rolled away. Death has been defeated and Jesus is alive.

Mary Magdalene's encounter with the risen Jesus is surely the most tender and beautiful of all the Gospel accounts of resurrection appearances. Mary has gone to the garden to pay her final respects at the place where Jesus' body had been laid. The discovery that the tomb has been opened and that his body is no longer there initially adds to her distress. Perhaps through the veil of tears she sees that she is not alone in the garden. A man is standing close to her. We know that it is Jesus, but she does not know until he speaks to her and says her name: "Mary". And in joyful recognition she exclaims, "Rabbouni! Master!"

In that account there is a telling and touching phrase that John uses when Mary Magdalene first sees Jesus: "Supposing him to be the gardener..." It was a reasonable assumption. Who else would be in the garden so early in the morning, if not the one whose task it was to tend it? But John the Evangelist has a way of hinting that even the most simple and natural of phrases can have a deeper meaning, and surely that is the case here. Yes, this is a case of mistaken identity. It is not the usual gardener, come to water the plants before the heat of the day. But at a deeper level, perhaps Mary Magdalene has unwittingly spoken the truth. Jesus is the Gardener.

The story evokes the very first story in the Bible, of the garden of Eden where humankind began. God, we are told, planted a garden, a Paradise, where he put the man whom he had fashioned from the dust of the ground. God is the supreme gardener, the one whose work enables life to flourish.

A common feature of all the Gospel accounts of the resurrection of Jesus is the timing when this took place. It is early on the morning of the first day of the week. The seventh day has been the sabbath, the day of rest; but the first day marks the beginning of a new week and hence a new creation. Easter Day is a celebration that the God who created all things is the God who, in raising Jesus to life from death, has brought about a new creation. We have the promise of a world in which death no longer has the final say. As every gardener knows, however long and harsh the winter, spring will come. The flowers that appeared dead or dormant will blossom again. The garden is a place of life.

So if you can spend today, or part of today, in the garden, then do. And if you can't, remember that Jesus the gardener meets us wherever we may be, and transforms our tears of mourning into tears of joy.

Easter Blessing

The God of peace,
who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus,
that great shepherd of the sheep,
through the blood of the eternal covenant,
make you perfect in every good work to do his will,
working in you that which is well-pleasing in his sight:
and the blessing of God almighty,
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
be with you and those whom you love
this day and always. **Amen.**