

## St Andrew's on the Terrace Easter Day 21 April 2019

### Readings for the Gathering Gospel

### The Empty Tomb

John 20: 1-18

**20** Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. <sup>2</sup> So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Master out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!" <sup>3</sup> So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. <sup>4</sup> Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. <sup>5</sup> He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. <sup>6</sup> Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, <sup>7</sup> as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen.<sup>8</sup> Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. <sup>9</sup> (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.) <sup>10</sup> Then the disciples went back to where they were staying.

### Jesus Appears to Mary Magdalene

<sup>11</sup> Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb <sup>12</sup> and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. <sup>13</sup> They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?" "They have taken my Master away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him." <sup>14</sup> At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus. <sup>15</sup> He asked her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?" Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him." <sup>16</sup> Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means "Teacher"). <sup>17</sup> Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to ... my God and your God.'" <sup>18</sup> Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Master!" And she told them that he had said these things to her.

### Contemporary reading

from "The Answer" by R S Thomas

There have been times/ when, after long on my knees/ in a cold chancel, a stone has rolled/ from my mind, and I have looked/ in and seen the old questions lie/ folded and in a place/ by themselves, like the piled/ graveclothes of love's risen body.

### Reflection for the Gathering

The resurrection of Jesus Christ – did it happen or did it not? This is perhaps the major question of the Christian faith for people who find they need evidence based reasoning and argument to work out the intricacies of this world.

At this time and distance from that day, I can't possibly give you a definitive answer, but I have lived long enough to find that things I thought not possible in my youth, now are possible. I was in the senior forms at high school when human beings landed on the moon. I can now phone the other side of the world without booking the call or needing an operator. I carry around with me a phone which has more capacity than my first computer. It's called a smart phone and it is definitely smarter than I am! I have just learned to plug in that phone to my TV and watch an event live from half way round the world. Many other probably more important things are now possible that weren't when I was 12 years old, these are just some I am marvelling at, at the moment.

So, when I came to resurrection, I have always wondered if we might through science find out more than we knew when I was 12, particularly more than the disciples need in the year approximately 33 CE. I have wondered if it wasn't a little premature in the 1960s to declare the actual resurrection of a body 'null and void' just as calling Australia *terra nullius* when it was colonised was a similar mistake.

One scientific piece of reasoning I have pondered from time to time is the equation  $E$  equals  $m c$  squared.  $C$  is the speed of light and a very big number. So, if you took the mass of a man like Jesus – probably about 70kg and multiplied it by the speed of light two times, that would give you a lot of energy. More than enough to roll away a stone and evaporate a body or transform it into some kind of hologram which people say walking, talking and moving through locked doors. It's just a little fantasy of mine and who knows?

I have *always* been convinced that the symbolic mythology this story delivers us is vitally important to our health and well-being; this three-part movement from death and failure through stillness and silence, into a transformed life. So often we meet people stuck in good Friday – they have had a terrible crisis and it has marred and scarred them and it seems they are stuck unable to move on from that grief and pain. Or, we find people having descended into the hell that is Easter Saturday, unable to emerge from that black hole. Or, we meet people who have skipped both those stages by a massive regression of their sad and negative emotions and live in a perpetually grinning false happiness that grates on others because it is obviously artificial.

Then there are the people we meet who have gone through the hell of Good Friday, suffered through their Easter Saturday transitional experience and have emerged somewhat battered and scratched but nevertheless have emerged, their Easter Sunday triumph all the more special because of the pain negotiated on the way.

That's a archetypal and psychological take on the spiritual process and we benefit by using a mixture of those insights to deepen our own personal Easter experience.

But science presented me with another way to consider this Easter Sunday transformation.

Roger drew my attention to a Scientific American article about biologists attempts to resurrect an extinct Hawaiian hibiscus plant, more specifically to resurrect its fragrance. Again, like smart phones and smart TVs, this process could not have been done when I was 12. I am old enough to remember when at high school knowing that the structure of the double helix, the skeleton of our DNA, being a very new discovery within the last decade or so.

The search was engaged to see if the fragrance of the flower, extinct since the early twentieth century, could be – well the world used in this scientific American article is resurrected. The idea developed at a conference of people engaged in the fragrance and flavours industry from a meeting of a synthetic biologists with a consultant for a swiss perfume company.

The search began with sourcing the pressed and dried flowers and leaves of the plant which had been named in 1910 but became extinct shortly after. From the tiny amount of material which they were allowed to remove from the Harvard Herbaria where the dried material was stored, eventually the DNA sequence was obtained. Cooperation flowed over months from Boston to Santa Cruz where Californian scientists were able to get the sequencing of the DNA from the minute samples. Back in Boston working with their small fragments of DNA sequencing in his computer, Jue Wang, a computational biologist, then used a machine called (believe it or not) a DNA printer to make actual synthetic DNA from the extinct plant.

Then the group used yeast cells to accept this new DNA and make molecules according to the instructions contained within the DNA code from an extinct hibiscus tree. After a process which had last a full three years, the group of scientists had produced real scent molecules made from instructions contained in the DNA of an extinct plant! ON the momentous day when they first smelt the scent, one scientist said "First resurrected fragrance! And then later... This is pretty magical, to be honest. I hope it captures people's

imagination and gets them to think about what we've lost." Another said "I feel overwhelmed, I couldn't image what this was going to smell like" and later, she said "I like the lightness [of the fragrance]. It feels ethereal"

A diagram of the process with captions in boxes summarised the process and made me think of a parallel to the resurrection we are reflecting on today. The statement in the diagram said this:  
Road to Resurrection

Bringing genes back from the dead is not simply a matter of finding ancient DNA. The genetic material has to be refashioned into a working gene that can construct a cell to make molecules. The gene – in this case from an extinct Hawaiian plant called a mountain hibiscus – then has to be placed into a new, living host. Synthetic biologists at Ginkgo Bioworks inserted the gene into yeast, where it actually made fragrant compounds.

Thinking about the resurrection of Jesus we could adapt this statement:

Road to Resurrection

Bringing *Jesus* back from the dead is not simply a matter of finding *an* ancient *body*. *The DNA of Jesus' life and message* has to be refashioned into a working *programme* that can instruct a *person* to *live like Jesus did*. *The programme of life and work...* then has to be placed into a new, living *person who can actually take action to live as Jesus lived, releasing the sweet smelling fragrance of resurrection*.

In our case, the DNA printer could be regarded as the authors and contributors to the scriptures, who gathered fragments of the Jesus story and got them into a sequence which made sense to them. They don't give us a word by word, action by action account of the full three years or so of Jesus' teaching. They have extracted for us what they thought was important among the many things he said and did. That is, we could say, they extracted the DNA, the vital, life-giving instructions.

What is that vital DNA which, when we allow it to enter our very selves and allow ourselves to be instructed by it, has the power to release again into the world the fragrance of Jesus' way of living?

Two key DNA fragments are the great commandments which Jesus used to summarise the law: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength; and your neighbour as you love yourself."

There are many rich veins of gold in this statement. Jesus is not too proud or arrogant to acknowledge that God is the leader, the supreme one, the Lord. There is the insight that our lives are best organised if love of God comes first. Another insight is that this relationship with the divine is one of love, not fear. Jesus also instructs us that we are to love ourselves, for then we have a good basis for loving also our neighbour who is just like us whatever their orientation, race or creed.

Looking among the DNA fragments we might find the story of the lost son who came home and found a greater welcome than he expected – the DNA might read "There is always welcome at the gate to home"

In another place we find that Jesus has come to free captives of all sorts, to give sight to the blind and relief to the poor – so that if we choose to accept the mission becomes now our task in our time.

And in another incident, we learn that only if we are without any kind of deficit or wrongdoing in our own lives can we cast the first stone at those who we find wanting.

It is no accident that this metaphor for resurrection of Jesus life's programme, of the Jesus Way is the resurrection of a fragrance, for the life and work of Jesus did not include foul; smelling arrogance, acrid scents of dishonesty or guile, no putrid scent of rottenness or cruelty or violence.

Early on the first Easter Sunday morning, faithful women came to the tomb bringing sweet smelling spices with which to properly dress the body that had been so hastily entombed two days before. They found spices were not needed! Somehow this human being whose life they had seen being extinguished the previous Friday, had released a new scent into the world. It is now still available to perfume our lives if we will let it into our system; if we will allow the DNA of Jesus to instruct our very selves to be transformed and thereby be made able to transform the world.

There is a 'lightness' about this, it is something we "couldn't imagine" ... "This is pretty magical" .... "It feels ethereal" ... we might "feel overwhelmed" ... - just as the scientists said it was.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Rowan Jacobsen, 'Ghost Flowers; Resurrecting the genes of extinct plants', *Scientific American*, Scientific American, Springer Nature America Inc., New York, NY., February 2019, Vol 320, No. 2, p.35.