

Easter 2017

St. Brandon's

Matthew 28: 1-10

16th April 2017

What did the hungry clock do? It went back for seconds! Boom, boom!

Now I hope that's not the only thing you remember of this sermon! "What did Geoff preach about?" "Oh, I don't know, something about the resurrection, but he told a good joke: What did the hungry ...". No! And there is a link, albeit a pretty tenuous one, from the joke to what I want to come on and say.

But some of you may have thought that telling a cheap joke was rather inappropriate at a moment which is one of the most spiritual in the Christian year and in our lives – the moment at which Jesus is raised from the dead. Why soil it with an earthy joke, (though at least a clean one)?

And my answer is that, while of course the resurrection is a profoundly spiritual reality, the setting for it is profoundly practical, physical, even earthy. There is, in this story of the resurrection, as in all other stories of the resurrection, a glorious (and I use that word deliberately), a glorious blend of the spiritual and the earthy.

The two Marys go to the tomb at dawn and, if Mark and Luke are telling the same story at this point, they have spices with which to anoint Jesus' body. A very practical, physical thing to do, though obviously an action with spiritual significance as well. Then a great earthquake occurs – nothing more earthy than that – apparently brought about by an angel descending from heaven – nothing more spiritual than that. And yet, the angel, this spiritual creature, rolls back the stone – a very physical act – and then, in what is both a delightful point of detail and evidence, I think, of the eye-witness account that is being told – he sits on it! It's as though the angel (and sorry, but this was the image that came to my mind), says, "Cor! Well, that was heavier than they told me it would be. I think I'll take a bit of a rest, sit down, do a Sudoku, while I recover." Now, I know that's a rather irreverent image – no angel would waste his time doing a Sudoku! But the angel's physical presence is so immense, like lightening (to go with the earthquake) and with clothing white as snow, that its effect on the guards is, quite literally, to knock them out.

Now why the angel rolled back the stone, we'll come back to, but he then passes on his message, "Jesus is not here. He has been raised. Come and see. Go and tell. He is going ahead of you to Galilee." And again it's worth noting that he does not say that Jesus has floated off into heaven, but gives them a *physical* rendezvous, a *place* where they will see him again.

But then, of course, Jesus confounds the angel's words by meeting them as they run (a rather physical response, not at all a very spiritual thing to do – we would never run in church, would we, just process sedately?). But they run. And Jesus' word to them, which stops them in their tracks, is just a very normal everyday word of greeting, a kind of "Hi there!", not at all a profoundly spiritual word of blessing which we might expect. And in response the women bow down and take hold of His feet, presumably seeing up close the marks of the nails, but also in a kind of rugby tackle – Jesus can't go anywhere until they let Him go; perhaps they don't want Him to go. But in this very physical action they also worship Him – the first people to worship the risen Christ. And Jesus then repeats what the angel had said: Go and tell, and then go to Galilee where the disciples, His (forgiven) brothers, will see him. All very practical, physical instructions.

So I hope you see the glorious blend of the spiritual and the physical in this story. And the point, of course, is not just that, but what else it tells us. For the resurrection takes place within our material reality, not abstracted from it in some ethereal way. It is a combination of the spiritual and the earthy. It somehow makes sacred the material world we inhabit. Rowan Williams puts it like this, "... to proclaim the resurrection is to say, 'God's purpose is the transfiguration, not the cancellation, of history in the material world.' God does not want to rub out what's there so he can do something better, God is interested in all that we have become as

historical and material beings, and that's what he will raise up. Which, of course, gives a very serious and very profound theological valuation not just to our bodily and material selves, but to the material world in which we live."¹ Let's not forget this blending of the spiritual and the earthy, and the transfiguring of the earthy through the resurrection.

Come and see. Go and tell.

But there is one other related point that is worth drawing out of this reading. Why did the angel roll away the stone? And this is one of those questions a bit like they ask on QI, where the obvious answer, the answer everyone knows to be correct, is actually wrong, and the hooter blares and the lights flash! Why did the angel roll away the stone? To let Jesus out. Hooter / lights! No! Jesus had already been raised and had escaped from the tomb! So why did the angel roll away the stone? To let the Marys, and probably the other women who were with them, and Peter and John, *in*. And what do they see when they get inside? That Jesus is not where they expected Him to be. (I wonder whether that's also occasionally your experience – that God is not where you expected Him to be.)

So where is He? And the answer is that He is alive and at large in the world.²

But perhaps we can be more specific than that. The tomb, as we know from John's gospel (19: 41) was in a garden.³ So Jesus was walking in a garden in the cool of the morning. What does that remind you of? Perhaps of "the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze" in Genesis (3: 8). We are back, the clock not just going back for seconds but 'four thousand winters' as the carol puts it,⁴ we are back in the garden of Eden, and at the very point where Adam and Eve are about to be found out and sin has entered. And nor is the garden in which Jesus meets the Marys a paradise. The tomb and the garden were nearby to where Jesus was crucified (John 19: 41-2), possibly within sight of the place of crucifixion. The evil of the world is focused there. And the risen Christ is not only alive and at large in the world, but He is taking us right back to the beginning of human history, and to all the mess and evil, all the ways in which we have and do muck up the world. And to transfigure them with His risen life.

Come and see. Go and tell.

Amen.

¹¹ Rowan Williams, *God with us. The meaning of the cross and resurrection – then and now*. SPCK, 2017, p. 95.

² John Masefield, cited in Rowan Williams, *op. cit.* p. 65.

³ See James Alison, *Undergoing God. Dispatches from the scene of a break-in*, DLT, 2006, pp. 56.

⁴ 'Adam lay y-bounden'.