

EASTER DAY – APRIL 12th 2020 – ST JAMES' CHURCH, PORTO

Acts 10:34-43; Psalm 118:1-2,14-24; Matthew 28:1-10

“Do not be afraid.”

There is a delightful book by Martin Waddell and Barbara Firth entitled *Can't You Sleep, Little Bear?* Little Bear's problem is that he is scared of the dark. Big Bear provides bigger and bigger lanterns but nothing helps. Little Bear knows that outside the cave there is a lot of darkness, so the lanterns make no difference. Eventually Big Bear takes Little Bear outside to look up to the sky and face his fears. When Little Bear sees the moon and the stars, shining far above, splitting the darkness, he is at last able to fall asleep.

It's natural to be afraid of the dark. But Matthew's story of the resurrection tells us about people who were afraid of the light. Sometimes, the darkness is easier to cope with.

The disciples of Jesus had lived through a roller coaster of emotions during that first Holy Week. They had been carried along by the cheering crowds of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. They had spent the festival, vigilant in the face of the risk to Jesus from the authorities, Jewish and Roman. They had experienced the intimacy of eating and drinking with Jesus and one another at the Passover supper; and then the fear, the shame, the despair and the grief of Jesus' arrest, trial and horrific death. In those circumstances, the deadness of grief seems welcome. It offers the chance to retreat into the dark and to stop feeling for a while. There is comfort in the dark, and a certain bleak peace.

So two women called Mary go early in the morning to a tomb they know to be secure and guarded. They go to grieve. The bright light of a Jerusalem morning may be shining around them, but there is darkness in their hearts. And perhaps there is comfort in that. Now that it is all over and the adventure of travelling with Jesus has come to an end, they can do what women do – weep for the dead, and tend to the living. They are sad, of course, devastated even, but they are not afraid, not any more. When the worst you feared has happened, there is no more reason to be afraid.

So it is not the darkness that scares them out of their wits, but the light – the light from two figures who ought not to be there. One is from another world, an angel (Matthew 28:5) who should not exist in the real world of a Jerusalem garden. The other should be dead. Both break into the darkness of grief and despair with a searing white light of hope and joy. And the women are afraid. Grief they understood: it has its rituals and its expectations, and they know what is expected.

But this new thing, this unexpected joy, this painfully bright light – this is terrifying. In their grief, the walk to the tomb has been long and slow. Now all is movement. They run from the angel and from the empty tomb, not knowing whether to scream or sing. And they run headlong into Jesus. Little wonder that they fall at his feet. And his first words to them echo the message of the angel earlier: “Do not be afraid; go and tell.”

Each of the Gospel writers tells the story of the resurrection in a distinctive way. None of the Gospels attempts to tell us what happened to Jesus between Good Friday and Easter Day. That remains a mystery. Instead, the Gospel writers show us the effect of the resurrection on those who were there. Matthew's account describes an earthquake and an angel like lightning. But he is not alone in describing the first reaction of those who experienced the resurrection as one of fear.

So, as we sing 'Alleluia' on Easter Day, it is probably not fear we are feeling. But perhaps it should be.

The women at the tomb were right to be afraid. A bright light had pierced the gloom of the world, and nothing would ever be the same again. Dark death had been overcome. All the old, comfortable certainties had failed. The world had been turned upside down. And there were consequences. No returning to the safety of domestic work for the two Marys, but a commission to spread the good news. And no safety for us either, if the light pierces through our lives and into our hearts today. Instead, for us, there is a life committed to the truth. Perhaps we should be more afraid, in order to hear the risen Jesus speaking to us: "Do not be afraid; go and tell."

May God be with you and bless you this Eastertide – and may we be faithful in sharing the good news of his love and of the gift of eternal life for everyone. Amen.

