

Easter Sermon 2009

John 20.1-18

Corrie ten Boom

What is it like to have been to the bottom in life, and then been restored? What is it like, to have suffered a great personal crisis, when all people turned against you, and you turned in on yourself, but then be restored so that you can love and forgive again? What is it like, I wonder, to know so powerfully God's love and forgiveness that in a twinkling of an eye, your life is revolutionised, taken out of its rut, turned upside down, and made totally new?

In the *Faith Confirmed* course, which a group of us have been doing, we came across this story from the life of Corrie Ten Boom, a Dutch evangelical Christian, writer, and concentration camp survivor. One day after the war Corrie ten Boom was preaching at a church service. In the congregation was a man who had been a concentration camp guard. The guard asked her to forgive him for all the murders he had committed. Corrie ten Boom wrote these words about it:

I stood there, I whose sins had again and again to be forgiven by God – and I could not forgive. I stood there with coldness clutching my heart. 'Jesus help me!' I prayed silently. 'I can lift my hand. You supply the feeling.' And so I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, and incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm and this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being. I had never known God's love so intensely as I did then.

Corrie ten Boom was able to forgive at that moment because the power of the Holy Spirit flooded her being, and enabled her to forgive by the power of God. And it was a life-changing moment for her.

Mary Magdalene

In our gospel reading this morning, there was someone else who experienced a life-changing moment. This was Mary Magdalene, one of the female disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. Christian tradition has it that Mary Magdalene was a woman of no repute, possibly even a prostitute. Something about Jesus had touched her, and these past years she had followed him, along with the other disciples. As we encounter her in the gospel this morning, she and the other disciples do not yet have our understanding of what the Cross of Jesus; for our understanding is informed by the resurrection of Jesus. For Mary Magdalene, as she comes to the tomb of Jesus, maybe to anoint his body with spices, there would only be an overwhelming grief, a dark sorrow in her heart – for all her hopes had come to nothing.

So Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb and sees the stone rolled away. She runs and tells Simon Peter and another disciple, possibly John, who come to have a look, and they find the tomb of Jesus empty, and the linen cloths in which he had been shrouded neatly put away. A little later, Peter and John have gone home, but Mary Magdalene remains outside the tomb, weeping, for she believes someone has stolen the body of Jesus.

At this moment, Mary Magdalene's life is touching bottom; it is true desolation, a massive personal crisis. Many of us can identify with her – in moments like we may experience in our own lives, when all hopes are dashed, everything has come apart, and we can see no way forward.

But then comes Mary Magdalen's transformational moment. She stoops to look into the tomb, and sees two angels. They say to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' She replies, 'Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.' As she says this, she turns around, as if perhaps to leave, defeated and broken; and then she sees Jesus, but thinks he is a gardener. 'Sir,' she says, 'if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.'

But this supposed gardener, who is indeed Jesus, says to her, 'Mary!' And at the moment her name is spoken, she knows who speaks it, and through her tears comes the word 'Rabboni!' which means Teacher. And her life is transformed, turned upside down, healed, made new. Later, she goes and tells the other disciples 'I have seen the Lord!'

Us

Corrie ten Boom, filled with the power of God to forgive, when humanly, she could not. Mary Magdalene, a shattered life transformed and made new by the risen Lord Jesus Christ.

One reason that the Church calls us to renew our baptismal promises at Easter is to remind us that we too, are being made new by the Risen Lord, being made new in a risen life full of the power of God to transform and change us; he calls us by the name of our baptism, to mend our broken-ness, to lift us up from the pit of despair. When your life hits bottom, hear Jesus call your name, and turn to him, for he will lift you up. If your heart is hardened by bitterness and un-forgiveness, know that the Holy Spirit released from the Cross by Jesus, and breathing into our lives the energy of the resurrection, can make the humanly impossible divinely possible. And pray, and ask, and receive.

Today is about celebrating with great joy the wonder of the Risen Lord, and letting him forever release us from the chains of sin and death. For he is with us, and raises us up with him. We have heard some of the witnesses to the resurrection in our readings this morning; when we come to the altar to receive him through bread and wine, we ourselves shall be fed with the life of the Risen Lord.

Conclusion

Six hundred years before Jesus, Isaiah the prophet wrote these words from God, which could well be about our Easter joy:

....now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour.

Today, we celebrate that the Lord has passed through the waters of death and the fire of hell for us, and brought us to the promised land of eternal life in his kingdom. With Corrie ten Boom, with Mary Magdalene, and Peter, and John, and the whole Church of God, let us rejoice and be glad. Like Mary in the garden, he calls us by name, and we are his.

Alleluia! Christ is risen. For God is good, and loves mankind.