

Homily, Easter Day 24 April 2011, CCSY

Dorothy Lee



There's a famous, fifteenth century painting by Fra Angelico of the women at the tomb on Easter morning. One of them is gazing down into the empty coffin, her face full of grief, her hand shading her face. Three other women are on the right, looking towards the rather solid-looking angel on the left who sits with finger raised. Right behind and above the women, separated only by a thin layer of cloud, stands the Risen Christ, his shepherd's crook in one hand and the palm of victory in the other.

Needless to say, the woman at the centre doesn't perceive him. She's facing the wrong way; she's looking in the wrong direction.

Mary Magdalene is that woman, and the only woman that St John mentions in his story of the empty tomb. In John's version, Mary Magdalene seems to come alone to the tomb on Easter morning. She comes to the garden of Jesus' burial, filled with a sense of grief and loss.

And that sense of pain and loss only intensifies as the story progresses. First of all, when she arrives, she's horrified to find the body of Jesus gone. Then when she turns to two of the male disciples, Peter and the Beloved Disciple, they're no use to her at all. They leave her at the tomb, weeping and frustrated: more than ever inconsolable. She doesn't even have the comfort of the body.

She is Fra Angelico's woman, gazing down despairingly into an empty casket; that is, until she turns and sees the 'Gardener' standing before her and hears him calling her name. Then she recognises him, almost immediately, as the One she loves and has seemingly lost. She recognises the living, unexpected presence of the Good Shepherd, the One who knows his sheep by name, the One who knows her by name. And, before she can contain her joy, or even properly express it, she's given the commission to proclaim the resurrection: 'Go and tell my brothers and sisters that I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'

So Mary Magdalene goes and she becomes the first person to proclaim the Easter message, the core message of the Christian Church: that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead.

How powerfully the imagery of that story speaks to us today—especially as it's captured by Fra Angelico!

How often in our lives are we overwhelmed by grief and loss, by pain and confusion, by anxiety and fear! How often do we find ourselves standing, as it were, gazing down into that empty coffin, that coffin that speaks louder than words of the absence of God!

Each time we feel these things—each time we struggle with loss and pain and fear—our tendency is either to stand and stare down with hopeless eyes, or to run away because the sight of our own pain, and the pain of those we love, is too much to bear.

The gospel this morning, the good news of Easter Day, is a very simple one. It doesn't call us to great feats of faith and courage and heroism. Most of us don't have much of that, in any case. It doesn't call us to try harder, to make more of an effort, to 'move on'.

You know the kind of fairly useless advice we get from well-meaning friends and family—and sometimes even find ourselves giving.

The Easter gospel calls us, quite simply, to *turn around*. There's not much effort required to do that, and only the tiniest speck of faith needed, as small as a mustard seed.

The reason for that is behind us, every time, stands the risen Christ, proclaiming his victory over death—and therefore over every kind of fear and pain and loss we can imagine; every kind of fear and pain and loss we've ever experienced. The risen Christ stands behind us, with our name on his lips, ready to offer us hope and new life—just as he does to Mary Magdalene.

All we have to do is turn and see him. He's there all the time, he's been there all the time: waiting for us to turn around and recognise him, as in the beautiful fresco of Fra Angelico.

The risen Christ is calling us this morning on Easter Day. He calls us to turn around and see his radiant presence; to hear his voice speaking our name; to hear his summons to proclaim the good news of his victory, in word and deed, to the world around us.

Christ is risen. Alleluia!