

## Easter Day: St Paul's Cathedral, Sale; 12 April 2020

Acts 10:34-43; Col 1:15-18a; John 20:1-18

Former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, sees the empty tomb in John's gospel – with its burial stone book-ended by two angels – as invoking the Mercy Seat described in the Book of Exodus.

The Mercy Seat was an empty space atop the Ark of the Covenant also flanked by two angels, made of pure gold. The Ark itself housed the law given to Moses on Mount Sinai, and was kept in the Temple's 'holy of holies'. It was the closest thing in Israel's religious imagination to the divine presence.

What a paradox, this empty, vacant throne of God; this space, where God is both present and absent: present for mercy, for grace, for healing, for redemption; absent with respect to all of our expectations and projections.

The resonance between these two liminal or threshold spaces is unlikely to be accidental on the part of the evangelist, for the last pages of the fourth gospel are filled with stories of non-recognition and near misses: today Mary Magdalene takes Jesus for the gardener; next Sunday Thomas literally feels his way towards identifying the Risen One as the Crucified One; later on, a mysterious figure on the beach tells the disciples where the fish are biting.

Rowan Williams, for one, thinks it's just as well. 'The form of New Testament proclamation,' he writes 'is bound up with substance. Without these narratives, the Church is left with a problem as to how it will avoid making belief in [the] resurrection simply a belief in its own capacities, making present the Christ who is "going ahead", [who is] not where he has been laid.'<sup>1</sup>

If there was ever an Easter Day on which we need to grasp that relationship between form and substance, it's this one. Here we are, not on Easter Day (just quietly!), in a near empty cathedral; and there you are, watching, listening to, or reading this from home.

Our assumption that we would be able to celebrate this feast in the way we pretty much always have in our context has been blown out of the water by the COVID-19 global pandemic. Not only that, we don't know what the impact of this event will be on our structures, our whole way of being church, for months to come, perhaps longer. How thin the veneer of our sense of control; and how important for us to hear again the news: 'he is not where he has been laid' as good news, lest belief in the resurrection become simply a belief in our own capacities, as a church, or as a culture.

This should not really surprise us, however. For in Israel's experience the divine presence is not easily 'pinned down'.

As King Solomon prays when dedicating the Temple, 'even . . . the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built.' (1 Ki 8:27)

And so it would prove for Mary, Peter, and the beloved disciple that first Easter morning, none of whom could yet interpret in the light of their own tradition what they saw – or, rather, did not see.

For they belonged to a people who had long since known that this elusive, often inscrutable God was for ever in the business of bringing life out of death, such that Lutheran theologian, Robert Jensen, can say "God is whoever raised Jesus from the dead, having first raised Israel from Egypt."<sup>2</sup>

The first creation story in Genesis, the very opening lines of *Torah* set the pattern: 'and there was evening and there was morning, the first day.' In God's good creation light comes out of darkness, not darkness out of light; which is why for our Jewish brothers and sisters every day begins with sundown.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Between the Cherubim: The Empty Tomb and the Empty Throne' in Gavin D'Costa, *Resurrection Reconsidered* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1996), 87-101, and here at 98.

<sup>2</sup> *Systematic Theology* (1997, 1:63)

God did not roll out of bed one Sabbath and ‘invent’ resurrection in response to a particularly bad Friday. Rather, in the raising of Jesus what has always been the divine longing and purpose for creation is shown forth for all: Jew and Gentile alike, as a theologically reflective Peter explains in our first reading.

Jesus embodies this not only in his dying and rising, but also in his living: in the works he did, showing no partiality, returning outsiders to community, which is to return them to life; and in the stories he told, like that of the Prodigal Son, who – as you may recall – gathered all he had, and travelled to a distant country, where he spends it all, recklessly, to the point that he must hire himself out to feed the pigs, emptying himself, one might say, taking the form of a servant.

And so this beloved son descends to the pits, before the long-suffering love of the father draws him up into his true identity, such that he can say, ‘I will arise and go to my father.’

That parable is writ large on Easter morning, as the eternally Prodigal Son, having spent everything, extravagant to a fault in lavishing the Father’s love on the far country of our flesh, coming not to be served but to serve, descending to the depths of Gethsemane and Golgotha – as this one says to Mary, ‘Go to my brothers and say to them, “I am ascending to my Father and your Father.”’

It is that divine embrace in which Mary seeks to be gathered. And hers is more joy than surprise.

The shout of Mary as she runs a second time and announces that she has seen him, that we have heard before:

- in the divine summons, ‘Let there be light’;
- in the cries of newborns, as Sarah and a line of ‘barren’ women after her give birth, including to Joseph who is rescued from the pit;
- in the rattling of Ezekiel’s dry bones as they are animated;
- in the spewing forth of Jonah from the belly of the whale;
- in the roar of still-hungry lions as Daniel emerges from their den;
- in the subversive lullaby of another Mary: ‘he has brought down the mighty from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly’;
- and in the slamming of the farm gate as the father runs to greet his far-off, long-lost son.

Yes, the story of Easter began a long time before the first Easter, and it’s a story that is not done with us yet, even – or especially – in the midst of a pandemic.

In the baptism we are about to reclaim, we find our true identity in the Crucified and Risen Christ, as beloved sons and daughters with him of the One he called Father, whose generous heart – that inexhaustible seat of mercy – is ever-emptying in compassion towards us and all his children.

They’ll say you’re mad, Mary, as breathlessly you tell them you have seen the Lord. Yet, to have said otherwise would be the real madness.

If you’d told us that you’d found him there, still, and cold, and lifeless – this Word of God who inspired creation, whom highest heaven cannot contain, much less a temple, or a tomb – if you’d told us that we might be surprised.

No, he has arisen to the embrace of his Father and ours, to the ring of belovedness – his and ours – to the robe of glory to which our baptism points, and to that banquet in which we begin to share at this table.

It is fitting, then, in this joyful if subdued Eastertide, to make merry and be glad, for this One who was lost to Mary is found; our brother – the first-born in all things – who was dead, is alive: the first-born also from the dead.

And so shall we be found in him; and so shall we rise up today and tomorrow into the fullness of life he came to bring: this Christ who is always going ahead of us, from the swaddling bands of the cradle to the grave clothes, and beyond. For he is not where he has been laid; he is risen, alleluia! *+Richard, Gippsland*