



Sermon: 30th April 2017

From grief to gladness

Acts 2: 14a, 36-41; Luke 24: 13-35

I was there, you know, at the foot of the cross, along with his mother, and his mother's sister, and Mary Magdalene. I was there; I'm the wife of Cleopas. John noticed us, and he noted it in his account of the events of that day. So, I was there, I saw him die.

I couldn't believe that it had come to this. All the hopes we had, the dreams, the expectations, the anticipations! We thought he was the one, you see. The one who would usher in the new kingdom. Who would set us free from the Romans. We were so excited, and amazed and astonished. He did such wonderful things and he was so wise! I was there as he grew up, I was almost like a sister to his mother, and he was always special. He was a boy like other boys, don't get me wrong. He got into scrapes, he fought with his friends, and that time we thought he was lost! It turned out he was in the temple all the time, and the answer he gave his parents! "Did you not know that I should be about my father's business?" I don't know whether or not it was impertinent, and obviously his parents struggled with that too. Should they be angry? Or proud? I tell you this so that you can see, we were expecting great things of him and it all seemed to be going so well, until that last week.

I know some of the others begged him not to go to Jerusalem. They said it was too dangerous, but he was determined. And when he rode into Jerusalem and the crowd shouted and cheered, I thought maybe it would be alright. But then he overturned the tables in the temple courtyard and I realised that he was in danger. And so it came to this and he is gone and we are left, bereft.

I was a bit surprised by the way I felt after they took him down and took the body away. I am sad, of course, utterly distraught, as though part of me had been ripped out. I have wept until I am numb from shedding tears; my heart and throat and eyes and head aching, aching. Because it was not just the loss of a friend who was as close as a son, it was the loss of our hopes and dreams. It was the end of everything, it seemed. And a bitter grief, to have hope snatched away like that. Better never to have hoped at all.

But what surprised me was that I was angry too. Angry at the Romans for their part in his death, and at the chief priests and Pharisees for handing him over. But I was also angry at him for dying; how dare he leave us like this, walk into danger, when he KNEW what he was heading into. And I was feeling guilty for feeling angry because I loved him, we loved him and we shouldn't have felt angry with him once he was dead, but we did. But I was angry at God too, for deserting him ... so very angry. That cry! My God, my God, why have you abandoned me!" Such a cry of loss and yearning. A terrible cry. I've never heard the like and I never want to again. But although I was angry at God, I was a bit scared. Is it ok to be angry at God? Yet Jesus ... I wonder, was he angry when he loosed that awful cry?

And then after it all was over, Cleopas and I set off for home. We went over and over what happened. Wondering if we could have prevented it. What if we had persuaded him not to go to Jerusalem? What if we had persuaded him to leave after that scene in the temple? What if, what if, what if...

And then a stranger joined us. I didn't actually see him approach, but suddenly there he was, walking along beside us, and he asked us why we were so unhappy. You would think the whole of Jerusalem would know what had happened, how could anyone have missed it, but he seemed not to know. At first I didn't want to talk about it, my heart was too sore and I didn't want to revisit all that had happened in the last week. But then, as we began to speak, the words came faster and after all, I realised that it was a comfort to us to speak of it. We explained that we had had such hopes of Jesus, that he would be the one, the Messiah. That all the miracles he did, and the wisdom of his words, were like no-one we had ever known before, and we had been so sure that he would set us all free. I don't know what we expected his response would be. I suppose you think that someone might offer condolences, or some words of comfort, but what he said was very surprising. He actually chastised us for our lack of knowledge and our unbelief! I was astonished, and hurt, and was nearly angry all over again, but there was something about him, and when he began to speak we just listened.

He pointed out to us things in the scriptures, in Isaiah and in the Psalms, that described the very things that we had watched! The psalmist described the way Jesus would be whipped and beaten, and the way his side was pierced by the soldier's spear, and the way the soldiers cast lots for his robe. And he pointed out that Isaiah had said that a young woman would have a son and he would be the saviour of the world. He talked on, pointing out the footprints of God through the history of our people that would lead to the coming of

the Messiah into the world. Then he explained what the coming of God into the world must be like - not a coming in power and might and majesty - but a coming into the world that embraced the whole of human life - fear and loneliness, suffering and pain, even death.

And he explained that all this had to take place before the Messiah would come into his kingdom. What a lot he had to tell us, and we questioned him and asked him about all these wonders. Our hearts burned within us with possibilities and visions of a future that we hardly dared think about. I won't say that it assuaged our grief at that point, but it was strangely comforting nonetheless. Was there more? Had we misunderstood?

It was getting dark as we reached home, and although he made as if to walk on we asked him to come in and stay with us. He was reluctant, almost, seeming not to want to intrude, but we assured him that he was welcome. We opened our door and invited him inside. We had a simple meal made ready of bread and wine.

And that was when the miracle happened. He took the bread in his hands and he blessed it and as he held it up to heaven I saw his hands, and the marks on them... and suddenly I knew! And I looked at Cleopas, and I could see that he had noticed it too!

We looked at one another scarcely daring to believe. Mary Magdalene had said that she had been to the tomb and that he was risen from death. But dead men don't rise, and we knew that he was dead, so we were sceptical. But now, here, suddenly that fragile hope which had been snuffed out with his death was born afresh in our hearts, and we turned to look at him and he smiled at us, as if he knew all the thoughts that were tumbling over one another in our heads. And then he was gone from our sight, almost as if it had been a dream, but there was the bread, lying at his place, broken ... and we knew it had been no dream but was real.

I don't expect you can begin to imagine how we felt. There are no words to describe it. Happiness, yes, but tinged with awe, and just a little fear! What did all this mean?

We were amazed, and now we had a different set of facts to rehearse and dissect, but in joy this time, not in sorrow. And so we got up to walk back to Jerusalem, no matter the lateness of the hour, and talked all the way of what had happened. And as we talked, I came to realise what had happened and its significance. That our journey, from Emmaus to Jerusalem, real enough and hard, was also a symbol. A symbol of how this risen Lord

meets us in our despair, disappointment, and despondency. How he walks with us through the hard times, listening to our cries and our heartaches, journeying with us, a companion on the road. And in the midst of this darkness, his presence, his warmth, his care and his compassion bring light and life.

And it occurred to me that he had shown us how to take this message out to others. He asked us the questions that helped him to understand how we were feeling, and we can ask questions to start conversations about things that matter. He explained to us the things that we didn't know and we can explain all these amazing things and the truth of his life, and his death, and his resurrection and what it means for us and for others.

But I think the most important thing that he did was when he raised his hands to bless the bread. And I realised that the most important thing we can do is not to tell people things, but to show people that he is real and alive in our lives. And I think this is what he has trusted us with – to be his witnesses in word, but more importantly, in action, so that people can see that even in the midst of darkness and death, the message of the Emmaus Road, the message of Easter is light and life and hope.