



Easter Sunday morning - 31st March 2013

Acting-Dean: Bishop John Bluck

John 20: 1-18

Two young German backpackers turned up outside my gateway on Napier hill last week, very early, while it was still dark.

I didn't mind, but my dog did and barked her head off, and I couldn't explain to her why they'd come. (Perhaps she's been watching too many old war movies about German undercover agents and submarines watching us.)

The backpacker's mission was to photograph the sun rising over the Bay, which they did, on a perfect autumn morning, and were overwhelmed by what they saw.

In years to come, when they settle down into behind a desk and a computer screen in an office in Berlin or Bavaria or wherever, these young men will remember this Napier morning. And the memory of that golden ball lifting out of the ocean that we see each morning will brighten up their grey northern European day.

They'll remember the sunrise but they may not remember the conversation I had with them, where I explained the cathedral they looked down on was the first in the world to see the sun each day. They didn't know what a privileged location it is that we enjoy, where we see the sun before the rest of the world.

That sort of explanation is handy to have but it doesn't define the experience of sunrise. No one's life was changed forever by such information.

Sunrises however, can spin your life around.

Mary Magdelene has an overwhelming and memorable experience in this morning's story. Like the German backpackers she wasn't quite sure what it all meant for a while. And the others who came after her, other woman disciples, and then the men, had even less idea. Commentators delight in pointing out that the women are smarter in this story, and the male disciples are thick witted and slow, but that's not the point.

What all the gospel accounts of Easter morning agree on is the disciples were terrified, confused and full of disbelief about what was happening around them and ahead of them.

Actually, that's about all the four different stories do agree on. Yes there is an empty tomb, yes Jesus is nowhere to be found, or found for very long, but the details of what happened differ, as they invariably do when people are terrified.

That's why jury trials last so long and court lawyers make so much money. You have to weave your way through the contradictions and confusions of eye witness accounts.

Something happened on that first Easter morning below the Mount of Olives in the centre of the old city. When you walk through Jerusalem today to the church of the Holy Sepulchre where it took place, through the labyrinth of streets and alleys, it's confusing even when nothing is going on.

And something was going down that day, like never before, not since the first day of creation, according to some of the gospel writers. Remember the garden with another god like gardener at work on the third day of creation itself. We're asked to recall that this morning, just as we're asked to remember that when Jesus calls Mary by name, he had told her earlier, along with the other disciples, that you'll know who the good shepherd, the true shepherd is because he calls his flock by their names.

At every level, this Easter morning story is saying treasure what you read here, because it is all about how we meet God through the risen Christ.

In other words, how do people get converted? That's the question this Easter story addresses, in a depth and detail we find nowhere else in the Bible.

So is there a formula for conversion? Our consumer market driven, technologically savvy, individually tailored society thinks there is, if we follow the key performance indicators in the manual. Sing this mantra, say this prayer, give up these bad behaviours, write this cheque, tune into this channel and God will come. Step right this way.

Happily it's more complicated than that. Conversion is more about turning around than stepping ahead. The Hebrew word and then the Greek is about turning back or even more turning right around.

Which is literally what happens in this story. Mary turns to see someone standing there who she doesn't know to be Jesus and when he speaks she turns again.

In our baptism our lives are turned to Christ, but we have to keep being turned back toward him because we lose the plot and can't see him for looking.

On this Easter morning we are being asked to turn back to Christ, to see him again in our midst, as if for the first time. To do a better job of putting the distractions aside, better than even the disciples managed to do.

Don't worry, they don't set the bar very high. The men get distracted, maybe because it was the women who were telling them. And some of them like Thomas, wanted physical proof. Though he didn't take it up when it was offered.

There were other distractions. They were looking in the wrong place. Don't go digging for the living among the dead, the angel had to tell them. Get out to Galilee where he's already gone.

But some of them did and met the risen Jesus on a mountain - the ultimate place for a God encounter. But Matthew records the meeting like this: "Some worshipped but some doubted."

Others were just plain sceptical. They'd have made great journalists. Look at everything but believe nothing, unless it's with a pinch of salt. There's a great line in the Luke account which says the disciples heard the news of resurrection but "it seemed to them an idle tale".

And let's not forget that most of the disciples were just plain scared. Too terrified to believe anything even if was in front of them.

The amazing thing about the Easter story is that any of the disciples ended the day believing much of anything at all.

It's clear that none of them had really understood what had happened. Maybe Mary. Maybe the two disciples on the Emmaus Road later in the day when they meet a stranger who turns out to be Jesus.

What they all did experience, and what proved to be more than enough to be going on with, was the encounter with something, someone overwhelming and memorable and inspiring enough to turn them round and set them off on a new path. That experience was powerful enough to ensure their lives were never the same again.

The forms it took were hugely different. For some like Mary, a word was enough, her name from his lips. For others, it was a meal, breaking bread together. For others it was a pilgrimage, to a mountain top, for others a surprise visit inside a locked room, for others a conversation with someone whose word they trusted, for others a fishing trip where they suddenly landed a catch that Sealords trawlers only dream about, for others some fast food on a beach, breakfast cooked by Jesus the Masterchef.

Different forms, in different places, not all at once, but over and over again, spread out over months and years, disciples are turned around by this experience of resurrection. It happens to them and the explanations come later, if they come at all.

There are so many of these different resurrection stories, says the gospel of John in its last verse, that "if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written."

So if resurrection keeps happening as the gospel saysk then how do we get to experience it? We the people who have already been turned around by baptism and wait to be turned again.

Well remember that it is God not us who does the turning. We say to God in the words of the prayer book each Sunday, "You come to us before we come to you".

Easter morning is a story about God taking the initiative. Resurrection doesn't need self raising flour. We don't supply the yeast in this recipe for new life.

But we do have to make ourselves available. Stop demanding proof, swallow our scepticism, get over our disappointment with the hand that life has dealt us, get out of our self preoccupation and self importance that gets in the way of God.

And it helps to find a community we can trust, where people speak the truth to each other with honesty and mutual respect and tolerance, even a little love if that's not asking too much.

The beauty of this Easter story is that it tells us we don't have to be very smart or holy or well organised to experience resurrection. Even if we're running about in a panic, bewildered and afraid, it will still come to us and if we let it and listen to what others seeking the same thing are saying, it will, God will, seep into our lives and turn us around to face the one who waits for us to follow him, to recognise him for who he really is.

And when we see him out there ahead of us, not among the dead things in our life but the living things, the sunrises, the things and the people that give us hope and delight, then most surely, we will be able to say:

Christ is risen

He is risen indeed.