

Followers of the Way

Resurrection

Lynda Rose, 31-03-24

John 20:1-18

'Early on the first day of the week, *while it was still dark*, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed ...'. Going back to the previous chapter, we know that on the Friday Jesus had been put to death on the Cross, one of the cruelest and most terrible forms of execution known to man, and that, after His death, as recorded in all four gospels, His body had been taken down from the Cross and given into the keeping of Joseph of Arimathea, a wealthy disciple of Jesus (Luke also states that Joseph was a member of the Jewish Council who had not agreed to Jesus' execution). But whatever his official position and status, Joseph had gone to Pilate – very bravely, it might be added, in the circumstances – and asked for the Lord's body for burial. And when the request was granted, he wrapped the body in a linen cloth and laid it in a rock-hewn tomb that had never before been used (Luke 23:50-53).

John further tells us, at the end of chapter 19, that Joseph was joined in this enterprise by Nicodemus, a Pharisee and leader of the Jews, who we've first met in chapter 3, when he came to Jesus by night to ask questions, and then again in chapter 7, when he counselled the Sanhedrin to exercise caution in their treatment of Jesus. He only appears in John, by the way – and here, now, after Jesus' death, he brings a mixture of myrrh and aloes – about a hundred Roman pounds altogether, we're told, the equivalent of around 73 pounds for us, or just over 5 stone. The pair then use the spices to cover Jesus' body, before wrapping it in linen, and then placing it in a tomb in a garden close to where he's been crucified, and which had never before used. Wrapping the body in spices, by the way, was a traditional part of Jewish burial custom. Normally, the body would first have been washed – but there's no mention of that here, and maybe it didn't happen, because it was so late – and then it would have been wrapped in spices, which were designed not to embalm the body, which was forbidden under Jewish law, but to minimise the smell of decomposition.

The other gospel narratives differ slightly. Luke, for example, tells us that because the sabbath was about to start, the women who'd kept vigil at the Cross and were there when Joseph took down His body, noted where the tomb was and then went home to prepare the necessary spices and ointments, so that they could come back and properly prepare His body on the first day of the week.

But in John, the necessary preparation has already been made and there's no obvious reason why Mary would have gone to the tomb so early. As things stand, however, it's still dark when she arrives and she discovers, to her horror, that the stone has been rolled away from the mouth of the tomb. She's clearly devastated by this discovery, and

without apparently bothering to check what's happened, she immediately rushes back to break the dreadful news to Peter and the disciples. Apparently assuming that the authorities have removed the body while no one was around.

One of the things that I think is interesting here is that it's still dark when Mary discovers something has happened. She doesn't actually have a clue what that might be, at this point, she only knows that something seismic has happened. Jesus' body has gone!

It's a strange thing about life that, when something momentous or even terrible happens, we often don't recognise or understand the moment when everything changes. Or we can somehow feel that things have changed, but we jump to the wrong conclusions. So here, for Mary, her discovery that the Lord has gone – the discovery that will literally lead to the greatest announcement in the history of the world – starts, unrecognised for what it is, in darkness.

Whether for good or ill, it's not always easy at first to recognise the times. And that brings me to what I think the Lord is saying to us this morning.

But, first, a little bit more background. When Adam and Eve took a bite from the apple back in Eden, from that moment the whole of creation changed. They, and by extension we, came under bondage to Satan – the destroyer. That was the first 'seismic' moment, if you will, that affected the whole of creation and destroyed our relationship with God. The second such moment began when Jesus was born, and ended when He died on the Cross and then rose from the dead. Something shifted cosmologically. God had won humanity back and, through the gift of the Spirit, restored those who accepted the Lordship of His Son to direct relationship with Himself.

In Jesus' resurrection, that first Easter morning, we see tangible evidence of the victory that had been won. The enormity of that, this side of the grave, is literally beyond comprehension – and that was what Mary was witnessing. The dawn of a new age.

When you think about it, how could she possibly have understood that, standing there alone in the garden, in the darkness before dawn? But that was the moment when, once and forever, things changed.

But, as we and the disciples rapidly discovered, that first Easter morning was just the start of Operation Overlord, God's plan to finally and forever smash Satan's hold and redeem the whole of creation. To continue the analogy, that first Easter Sunday was, if you like, D-Day. The beachhead had been made, the decisive battle had been fought, and the Allies had been victorious – but the enemy forces were still in occupation of the land and the fighting continued to be hard. To achieve *total* victory the allied troops then had to liberate and retake all the territory that had been lost and push through to Berlin, for the final confrontation with Hitler.

That's where we are now, still in heavy combat with the enemy, but we know that the final battle is coming, and that victory is assured.

When Christ was taken up to heaven, He commanded the disciples to go and spread the good news throughout the whole world – to make disciples of all men – promising that

at the right time He would return, leading the hosts of heaven, and that at that point Satan's hold would be finally and forever smashed and God's Kingdom fully restored. So, the time between Christ's ascension and now has been a time of dispensation, to allow all men and women opportunity to hear the good news and repent, so that they might be saved from the inevitable judgment that's going to fall when Christ returns. At which point, Scripture tells us that the devil, and all who've given him worship, will be cast into the lake of fire, from which there can be no return.

And that brings us to what I feel the Lord is saying to us today. I can hardly believe I'm going to say this, by the way, but I believe He's saying two very specific things. First, **Recognise the times**, and second, most importantly, **Be ready**.

Well, okay, you might think that seems pretty standard, given what's going on in the world. We all know that things have been getting bad, and that it feels as if evil has been getting a stranglehold – actually, I'll rephrase that, evil *has* been getting a stranglehold, and the results are plain to see. Chaos, confusion, the building blocks of society falling apart, government collapsing, and the ever-growing threat of world war. Things really do look bad, don't they, and it's obvious that something bad is building. Something that will be a pivotal moment in the history of the world.

So, exactly what is new about what I feel the Lord's saying today? It's this. We are witness to a battle in the heavens between good and evil, and the outcome will decide finally the future of the Earth. As part of that battle, God Himself has now entered the field. He's here – only, like Mary, we're still at this moment in the dark and we can't see. But He is here, and the forces of heaven are gathered around Him. Up to now, God has withheld His might, in order to allow every last chance for men and women to repent ahead of the final battle, and be saved. The message of repentance and truth has gone out ... we've been a very small part of that. But I feel God's saying that that window has now closed. Repentance isn't His top priority, and He's no longer going to withhold His hand. We're going to see the power of the Lord unleashed.

This doesn't mean men and women can't still repent, of course. They can, but the time of dispensation has come to an end. God is now going to release His power to deal with the darkness – the evil – that has taken over the Earth, and for those of us caught in the crossfire, it's going to be terrible. So He's saying to us today, this is warning and encouragement to my children of what is shortly to come, **Be ready!**

Let's be aware, by the way, that God's timescale is rather different from ours, and I don't think this means we're going to see outbreak of world war next week (though it might, of course). But He's saying to us, mankind has been allowed time to turn from their wicked ways and repent. They have not just ignored that call, but have consciously rebelled against me, and my patience is at an end. The time of dispensation is passed, and a new season has begun, the season when My power will be revealed. God, I believe, is now in battle mode, and there are really difficult times ahead, for all of us.

But **He's here**, the armies of the Lord are in battle array, and His word to us today is, **Be ready!** Only stand, and you will see the glory of God.

1. What did Jesus' death achieve?
2. Why does evil seem so strong today?
3. What can and should we be doing to counter the darkness?