

9

EASTER MORNING

New temple, new creation (John 20:1–10)

On the first day of the week, very early, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb while it was still dark.

She saw that the stone had been rolled away from the tomb. So she ran off, and went to Simon Peter, and to the other disciple, the one [Jesus](#) loved.

‘They’ve taken the Master out of the tomb!’ she said. ‘We don’t know where they’ve put him!’

So Peter and the other disciple set off and came to the tomb. Both of them ran together. The other disciple ran faster than Peter, and got to the tomb first. He stooped down and saw the linen cloths lying there, but he didn’t go in. Then Simon Peter came up, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there, and the napkin that had been around his head, not lying with the other cloths, but folded up in a place by itself.

Then the other disciple, who had arrived first at the tomb, went into the tomb as well. He saw, and he believed. They did not yet know, you see, that the Bible had said he must rise again from the dead.

Then the disciples returned to their homes.

‘He saw, and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise again from the dead.’ That comment from the evangelist provides a powerful link right back through John’s gospel. His Easter story is not just a strange event tacked on the end; it’s the point towards which the entire drama has been moving.

Throughout [Holy Week](#) we have been thinking about the way in which the events of Palm Sunday lead us inexorably forwards to the cross and resurrection, through the stories and themes which the evangelists place at this point. There’s a puzzle here, because in John’s gospel the so-called ‘cleansing of the Temple’, which we associate with Palm Sunday, takes place at the start of [Jesus](#)’ public career, not right at its end. But the words [Jesus](#) says there echo through the whole gospel as a major theme which finds full resolution on Easter Day itself. ‘Destroy this Temple’, says [Jesus](#), ‘and in three days I will

build it up.' Jesus' hearers misunderstand him; but John comments that he was speaking of the 'temple' of his body. So, John adds, when he was raised from the dead, they remembered what he had said, and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

For John, then, Easter is the rebuilding of the Temple, the place where God's sphere and ours intersect, where God meets with his people in grace and mercy and delight . When we say, 'Alleluia, Christ is risen', we are not saying 'Something very strange has just happened which provides a happy ending after all the sorrow of Holy Week and Good Friday', we are saying that the dwelling place of God is with humans, that he has come to be with us, and made us his people, and that God will wipe away all tears from all eyes . He begins that process in the next paragraph of John's Easter story, meeting Mary Magdalene as she stands weeping outside the tomb.

But in this first paragraph there is something very strange going on. People in the gospel story do not normally run. Let alone do they race against one another. Yet here everyone is running: Mary dashing to tell the disciples about the empty tomb, Peter and the beloved disciple running back, John getting there first, Peter catching him up and blundering ahead into the tomb, John following him in, seeing and believing. Breathless eyewitness testimony; and also the signs of something so shocking, so unexpected, so cataclysmic that the only proper response is indeed breathless haste, to find out what's going on, to discover what it all means.

If there is a biblical backdrop to the race to the tomb, it might be the two men in [2 Samuel 18](#), running to bring King David news of the victory over Absalom and his rebellion. The first one arrives and announces a great victory; the second one arrives and declares that the rebel leader himself is dead. The news was of course bittersweet for David; 'Would God I had died for you,' he says, 'O Absalom, my son, my son.' But now, kaleidoscopically, the news for which Peter and John have raced to the tomb goes out into all the world; great David's greater son has indeed given his life for his rebel subjects; David's Lord, the only son of the father, has defeated the ultimate enemy, death itself and the sin which causes it. He has won the messianic victory over all the forces of chaos and destruction.

And that is why the second great theme of John's Easter story, alongside the new Temple, is the new creation . We saw on Good Friday how on that day, the sixth day of

the week, the day when human beings were created in God's image to rule as stewards over creation, Pilate brings Jesus out to the crowds and declares, 'Behold the man!' And Jesus goes to his death with the final word *tetelestai*, it is accomplished. It is complete. Like God himself on the evening of the sixth day of the week, he has finished the work, the great task. He has then spent the long sabbath at rest:

O Sabbath rest by Calvary,
O calm of tomb below,
Where the grave-clothes and the spices
Cradle him we did not know.
Rest you well, beloved Jesus,
Caesar's Lord and Israel's King,
In the brooding of the Spirit
In the darkness of the spring.

But now it is the first day of the week; the day after the sabbath, the eighth day, the start of God's new world 🌱. It is early morning, still dark. It is the moment of new creation, the moment towards which John's gospel has been moving ever since his reimagining of creation itself in his Prologue; in him was life, and the life was the light of human beings; the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. Mary Magdalene doesn't know this yet; she comes to the tomb while it is still dark, only to be confronted with the initial evidence that the son of God has risen, a truth so bright that she can't yet look at it. When we see her again, in the next paragraph, the echoes of Genesis are unmistakable: she imagines Jesus to be the gardener. The whole scene declares, through symbol and echo and the onrush of themes from the whole gospel story: new creation has begun, and you're invited to be part of it! 🌱

That is, in fact, the central message of Easter Day, though the Western church has been quick to downgrade it in favour of something else. Easter is not the proof of life after death. Easter is not even primarily the proof that there is a life *after* 'life after death', a new bodily life after a period of being physically dead. Of course, if people don't believe those things, Easter is multiple good news; but the point is not that Easter is there to teach us a general truth, but that Easter is itself the *beginning of that 'life after life after death', that after-afterlife, the bursting in of the new creation upon a surprised and unready world, a new creation which is every bit as physical as you and me and*

indeed much more so, since this new body, Jesus' risen body, the prototype of new creation, is alive with a life which can't be harmed, cannot be touched by corruption or death.

This is a shock and a scandal—and it's the best news there ever was. It demands that we rethink our world-views and reorder our priorities and re-tell our controlling stories with this new Fact in the middle, a fact which calls into question our cheap little notions of what 'facts' themselves really are. Easter is about something that's happened, not about ideas in people's heads or even faith in their hearts. God's new creation has begun; the kingdom of God has appeared on earth as it is in heaven; and you're invited to be part of it, to be plunged into it in baptism, to eat and drink it in the Eucharist, to celebrate it in worship and to explore it in prayer.

And—to make it happen in the world. That is the primary calling of Easter, and Christian spirituality at its most authentic is about sustaining and equipping us for that task. Easter is not telling us that there is after all an escape hatch from the world, a private ladder up to a disembodied heaven. This is where so many of the Easter hymns, including alas some of my own favourites, get it wrong, or at least only half right, and the wrong half at that. Easter is not about the fact that 'Heaven's bright gates are open held', though they are; it's about the fact that the powerful new life of heaven has come to birth on the earth, and that we are to be its agents as well as its beneficiaries. Easter is not the celebration that Jesus is king 'above the sky', as though he'd simply, as we say, 'died and gone to heaven'. Easter is the celebration that he is Lord of earth as well as heaven. The message he 'bids us tell abroad' is not simply about 'how we too may enter heaven'; it's about how we can make new creation happen here and now. I suspect that at least half the reason why an older liberal theology felt obliged to oppose the orthodox view of Easter was because for the last two centuries, in our conniving at the Platonism of the Enlightenment, the church has said 'Christ is risen' and has meant 'so there is a supernatural world after all into which we can escape, with Jesus leading the way'. That wasn't and isn't the message of Easter.

The message is that new creation has begun, and you are called to belong to it and to make it happen in the world—whether by campaigning for making poverty history, for peace and justice in the Middle East, for a new start for refugees and asylum-seekers, or for a fresh vision of where we should be going in our country, in Europe, in our

schools and hospitals and cities and villages. Take the scriptures in one hand and the power of God in the other, take a deep breath of the air of new creation which blows through the world on Easter Day, and find what *you* can do to make new creation happen 🗡️. The powers of death and hell will be cross with you for doing so, and you'll face battles on the way. Go back again and again to the fact of Easter; the enemies are a beaten rabble, God's new creation will win the day, and you must be part of it. That is why the Easter message is a message of love, the love which believes the resurrection itself, the love which reaches up to God in gratitude and out to the world in generosity.

One of the key places to begin is with your own self. Our grand visions of God's new world can sometimes draw attention away from the personal battles with evil. We are sometimes tempted to think, 'If I work hard at bringing new creation to the world, I won't have to focus on how I behave, my own habits and choices and style of life.' Well, you will. If you want to be an Easter person for God's world, an agent of new creation, you can't refuse the challenge of [Colossians 3](#), the traditional Easter morning epistle.

In [Colossians 3:1–11](#), Paul talks very straight about what living as Easter people looks like in practice. He lists a lot of rubbish from the old creation which must be left behind in the tomb; five kinds of sexual immorality, five kinds of angry talk and behaviour. All of these are kinds of untruth, ways of behaving and speaking which are out of line with God's good creation. If the church had grasped [Colossians 3](#) we wouldn't be in the mess we're in. Instead, he says—echoing the baptismal imagery which has been associated with Easter from earliest times—you have stripped off the old clothing, the old self with its lifestyle, and have put on the new clothes, the new self which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of the creator. Easter is good news for the world; but it's got to start at home.

Our [Holy Week](#) journey is complete; and yet it is not complete. Easter is a beginning, not an ending. None of the four gospels ends its Easter account with a sense of 'Well, that's all right then; the story's over, we can breathe a sigh of relief.' Each of them, in their four very different ways, says something much more like: 'Now that the great battle has been won, you have a job to do' 🗡️. There's a world out there, God's Spirit will give you the energy and direction, and you are called to be renewed humans for the sake of God's new world.'

I am reminded of the story—I've heard it told of various people—about the professor

who was in the middle of a lecture when it was announced that war had broken out and things had to stop. Six years later he went into the same classroom and began, 'As I was saying when I was so rudely interrupted ...'. That is a bit what Easter is like. Now that the battle is won, now that sin has been defeated, let's get on with being real, genuine human beings. Now that death itself has been overcome, let's get on with the real human task, of bringing God's new life to his whole world.

One of the great Easter hymns catches this brilliantly:

Now let the heavens be joyful,
And earth her song begin;
The round world keep high triumph,
And *all* that is therein.

Yes. The heavens are indeed joyful; it's our job to get earth to join in the song. Christ the Lord hath risen, our joy that hath no end; yes, indeed, and it's about time the round world shared that high triumph, and all that is therein. We're the Easter people; let's get on with it.