

Hymns: 298: “Christ the Lord is risen today”
 294: “All you that seek the Lord who died”
 591: “Let all mortal flesh keep silence”
 313: “Thine be the glory, risen, conquering son”

Reading: John 20 verses 1-18

“I HAVE SEEN THE LORD”

Friday’s gone – the day of darkness, despair, death.

And Sunday’s here – the day to end all days. I’ve polished my shoes, had my hair cut, got the Manse windows cleaned. Our cross (here in church) is covered with spring blossom and the pulpit fall has been changed. This is the day of resurrection. A victory has been snatched out of the jaws of defeat life has been invested with new energies, and we can all proclaim:

Alleluia! Christ is risen!
He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

I heard a lovely little Easter story which went like this. Mary, mother of Jesus, was thanking Joseph of Arimathea profusely for making his tomb available to her in her grief. He shrugged off her words, saying: “That’s OK; after all, it’s only for the weekend.”

And so we hear the familiar words of the story as recorded in St. John’s gospel. The initial sadness. Mary’s pre-dawn visit to the tomb. The stone rolled away. The panic. The two disciples running helter-skelter to see if Mary’s message could be true. The confirmation of the facts. The meeting with Jesus – not dead but alive!

It’s an old, old story but we must be careful lest familiarity should breed contempt. We simply have to put ourselves inside the story, to re-imagine it, to sense its dynamic claim on us here, now, in our daily lives. Let’s revisit the event but this time put some verbs into the St John’s description. When we do that, something emerges which we simply have to look at. Here goes:

- Mary came to the tomb while it was still dark. She **saw** that the stone had been rolled away and ran to tell Peter.
- Peter and John (the disciple whom Jesus loved) ran to the tomb. John was younger, faster and fitter; so he got there first. He peered in (from the outside) and **saw** the linen wrappings lying there.
- Peter – always the brave one – ventured inside. He **saw** the linen wrappings lying there and the napkin which had been round the head of Jesus carefully folded up.
- John finally plucked up courage and went inside. He **saw** and believed. Now he understood the scriptures which said that Jesus must rise from the dead.

Mary **saw**; John **saw**; Peter **saw**; John **saw** and believed.

The English language is so dull at this point. The Greek original has three different words that are rendered by the monosyllable “saw.” I’ve done some very careful study of these in the giant lexicon which sits heavily on my shelves. And this is what I’ve come up with.

- Mary and John (the first time) see. The verb used here is the blandest of them all. It means “to look, see, have the power of sight.” That is, what is in front of them stimulates the optic nerve and endows them with the faculty of sight.
- When Peter sees, that fact is conveyed by a verb that means “to inspect, review, contemplate, consider something philosophically.” That is, Peter is described as wanting to make sense of what he sees, to understand it, to analyse it. He makes cognitive engagement with the phenomena in front of him.
- John (the second time) sees, this time it’s the interior of the tomb that he sees. The verb now used has a range of meanings including “to look to something, to take heed of something, to become aware of something.” That is, like Peter, he works everything out but, a further step accentuated by the addition of the fact that he “believes”, he takes all that he sees not only into his head but also into his heart. He both understands and submits.

All of this represents a challenge to us onlookers. We who look at this story two thousand years after the event must ask ourselves where we ourselves stand in the dynamic of the event.

Jennifer, Margaret and I are all registered participants in a research programme being conducted at our local eye hospital. The purpose of the study is described as “using a special high-resolution imaging instrument” to examine the retina with the aim of making an earlier and a more reliable diagnosis of age-related macular degeneration. In other words, the whole programme is intended to help people keep their sight and to avoid getting on the slope that leads to sight impairment and even blindness.

We must all hope and pray for the success of a programme like this. But we must never imagine that the ability to see (in this sense) is all there is to it. There is more.

The next level can best be approached by mentioning a series of little phrases that will throw their own light on things. We say, when we finally understand something that’s been puzzling us that “the penny dropped,” or when we realised that “two and two makes four,” or that something “sank in,” or “something clicked.” There are confusing matters which, when clarified, lead us to say, quite simply, “Ah, now I see.”

Margaret and I are fond of detective thrillers and have boxed sets all saved up for our dotage – we’ll enjoy all over again the series that have given us such pleasure. Morse, Lewis, A Touch of Frost and others too. The thing about these programmes is that, from the very beginning of every episode, clues are offered which will eventually point to the perpetrator of some evil deed or other. The clues are there but we will generally fail to see them. The ace detective, of course, will have spotted and followed up on them. He saw them. We didn’t.

How much do we miss in the lives we live? Things which, if we’d spotted them, might well have save us a lot of bother? Or else, given us greater insight into a problem we were faced by or an opportunity we might have seized?

I remember a favourite song I used to hear Danny Kaye sing when I was a boy. It was *The Ugly Duckling*. Poor thing, he’d been brought up by a group of ducks who made him feel quite different from the rest of them. He continued to

develop until these differences were exaggerated. The other ducks laughed at him. But one day, a passing swan looked at him with great admiration. For it was obvious that this was not an ugly (or any other kind of) duckling at all. The doors of perception had been opened. The penny had dropped. It began with his eyes but it sank into his understanding. The realisation deepened and he ended by claiming the truth for himself. As the song puts it: “He looked and ... he saw ... and he said... Geeeeeeeeeee! I **am** a swan!”

Jesus kept urging his disciples and others around him to see, really to see; to hear, really to hear. They should open their eyes, unstop their ears, to sense the inner truth of what was happening around them. But even this isn't all. There is more.

In the ninth chapter of John's gospel, there's the very dramatic story of a man who was born blind. Jesus cures him of his blindness and comes under fire from his critics for doing so. The man's recognition of Jesus mounts as the story goes on until, at the last, the formerly blind man accepts Jesus as his Lord. By that stage his opponents are crazed with anger at what he's done and, John suggests, we reach a situation where the man who'd been blind manages to “see” what's happening around him while those who've always been blessed with sight turn out, in matters like this to totally blind. The whole story is about seeing in the third and most penetrating sense mentioned earlier. The man born blind “sees” and believes; he recognises the one who becomes the most important person in his life.

And that's what the apostle John did in this morning's scripture passage. He saw and believed; what he saw touched him to the raw, got past his defences, engaged his very heart.

I remember meeting Margaret for the first time. It was in a dark subterranean meeting room and she was crouched over a coal-fired stove. It was winter and everything was drab. But her very presence lit up the room for me; I spotted her across the crowded room and lost my heart to her at once. It was love at first sight. Yes, at first sight. The mere perception of her had penetrated my whole being and warmed my heart. I was hooked!

I pray that the Easter message may be as vivid and powerful for you today as it clearly was for those who first met the risen Jesus in his own day. And that it may transform your lives as it has the lives of so many others down the ages. Amen.

