

Shortly after we arrived in Ahoghill, Rachel and I lead a small group on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, visiting many of the sites in Jerusalem and around the Sea of Galilee. On the Sunday we were in Jerusalem, our party attended morning worship at a site known as the Garden Tomb. It is one of the sites associated with the Resurrection of Jesus. Close by is a rock face with holes in it that gives it the appearance of a skull. There is no massive Church built on the site – it still has the atmosphere of a garden, the focus of which is a tomb hewn out of the rock. Even if it is not the actual site of the resurrection, it has an atmosphere all of its own. Whenever I read the account in John's Gospel of that first Easter morning, I often find myself thinking of that garden and our worship there that morning.

We went there that morning with thoughts of resurrection. That was not the frame of mind of Mary Magdalene when she went there that first Easter Day. She was one to whom Jesus meant a great deal. She is traditionally identified with the sinful woman who had washed the feet of Jesus with her tears of remorse. Despised by everyone else, she was welcomed and accepted by Jesus. She was one of the last to leave the Cross. She is the first to come to the tomb that morning.

She comes with her thoughts and her memories. Before meeting with Jesus, her life had been a mess. He had changed all that. He had given her back her self respect. Now all she has are her memories as she faces the prospect of life without Jesus.

Arriving at the tomb she finds it empty. She rushes back to tell the disciples not good news but horrible news – his tom had been ransacked. The disciples

in turn rush to the tomb. Finding it empty they go back into hiding, not knowing what to think.

She remains. She looks in. She has a vision of angels sitting where the broken body of Jesus had been laid – this does n't help – she still does not know where he is.

Then a figure asks her – ‘Woman, why are you crying? Who is it that you are looking for?’

Mary is still focussed on her last memory of Jesus as she stood at the foot of the Cross and watched him die. Unaware of who she is talking to, she asks about Jesus' body. ‘If you have taken his body – tell me where you have put it.’

Then the stranger addresses her by name. ‘Mary.’ The voice, tenderly speaking her name, breaks through the darkness of her despair. The empty tomb makes sense. ‘Rabbouni’ she cries and just wants to embrace him. How often in our times of despair do we find that it is not we who find God – even in our frantic search – it is he who comes to find us and seems to call us by name.

The gentle rebuke. ‘Do not hold on to me. Go instead to my brothers and tell them’ When we have had a special experience of God, like Mary, we want to hold on to it, to try to make it last. All too often, the more we cling on to it, the more it seems to slip away. The good news of the Resurrection is not something that Mary is to cling to – she is told to go and share it.

Jesus uses words that must have lifted the hearts of the disciples when Mary told them. ‘Go tell my brothers’ For them the Cross was not just the death of Jesus; it brought them face to face with their own weakness. They knew that they had failed. And yet they hear Jesus calling them brothers. The evangelical preacher will talk of conviction of sin. What he is saying is coming to the point where we recognise our failure before God – when we see ourselves as God sees us. It is at that point that God can begin to work in our lives.

Before the crucifixion there had been talk among the disciples as to who was going to be the greatest in the Kingdom of God, there was bravado as to who was going to defend him in the face of his enemies. Now they knew the emptiness of that talk – and yet – it is into this situation that Jesus sends word to his brothers – not servant, not even friends – but brothers.

That was morning that changed the world. What changed it was not the empty tomb but a meeting with the risen Jesus. A risen Saviour who sought out a despairing woman and changed her sorrow into joy; a risen Lord who was to seek our fearful and chastened friends and empower them for a mission that was to take the Gospel to the four corners of the world.

The risen Christ comes to us. Comes to us in our sorrow and speaks words of hope and life into our distracted hearts. Comes to us in our awareness of weakness and failure in his service and shows us his pierced hands and speaks his words of forgiveness. Comes to us in our confusion and speaks his words of peace.

Just as on Friday night we knew the reality of his death and suffering, so may our hearts this Easter Day hear his words of forgiveness, of hope and of peace.