

JOHN 20.1-10: SEEING AND BELIEVING

[Chelmsford 12 April 2009]

“Easter, what’s that all about?” wrote the journalist Libby Purves in *The Times* this week. “School holidays, traffic jams, airport miseries, gimmicky chocolate. Or, to be more cheerful about it, hot-cross buns and daffodils, lambs and chicks, family egg hunts and woodland walks with primroses. It marks the end of winter”.

Yes, for many people that is all Easter is about.

But for Christians Easter is not just the end of winter – nor is it about the beginning of spring. For the ending of winter and the beginning of spring are natural processes. But Easter is anything but natural. It is about God doing a new thing – God not simply reversed the natural processes of death and life, he actually triumphed over death and created new life.

Libby Purves was wrong when she wrote: “Believe in Easter. Spring must come. Daffs, lambs, chicks, watery sunshine, green shoots, hope. Hallelujah!”

Easter is about God intervening in human history.

Easter is about God raising his Son from the dead.

Easter is about hope – not hope in the natural process of life – but hope in Jesus, crucified and risen. In the words of the Apostle Peter, an eyewitness of the resurrection: **“Let us give thanks to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! Because of his great mercy he gave us new life by raising Jesus Christ from death. This fills us with a living hope”**.

Yes, it is the rising of Jesus from the dead, and not the blooming of the daffodils which gives us hope. It is because of the miracle of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead that Pope John Paul II could declare: “Do not abandon yourselves to despair, for we are the Easter people, and Hallelujah is our song”.

Light has come to our darkness – hope has replaced despair – not because of the daffs, the lambs and the chicks, but because of Jesus.

Easter is about Jesus – Easter is about the resurrection of Jesus.

And when we speak of resurrection, we speak about an event in history.

Alas, there are theologians who delight to muddy the waters and speak of Easter as though it was not an objective event of history, but rather a subjective experience within the human heart.

In the same edition of *The Times* in which Libby Purves summarized the message of Easter in terms of hope of an eternal spring, Geza Vermes, a former professor of Jewish studies at Oxford, wrote an article headlined: “*The hard facts of the resurrection lie in the hearts of his followers*”. After a cursory examination of the evidence for the resurrection, he concluded: “*They (the Apostles) felt their master close to them. He rose in their hearts. This is the historical element in the Resurrection*”.

But the professor is wrong. The apostles did not say that they felt Jesus was alive – they declared the tomb to be empty. Easter was not and never has been about myth and symbol – Easter is about an event in history.

This morning we come not to celebrate an experience – but rather to celebrate that God raised Jesus from the dead. It is this that we are called to believe.

So with that introduction, let's look at John's account of the empty tomb. As we do so, we shall discover that John tells of three different people "seeing" the empty tomb - but only one of these actually realising its significance and believing in the resurrection.

1. Mary saw - and jumped to the wrong conclusion

The Mary here is **Mary Magdalene**. In all four Gospels Mary Magdalene is one of the women who discovered the tomb was empty that first Easter Sunday morning.

Unlike the other Gospels John does not mention the other women who accompanied her. John's concern was for Mary, and for Mary alone.

However, John was not unaware of the others.

Look at verse 2, where Mary says: "**They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and WE do not know where they have laid him**". The plural requires that several people were present.

We know from the other Gospels that Mary and the women came to anoint the body of Jesus. Mary and her friends wanted to pay their last respects by carrying out one final act of devotion. However, to Mary's amazement, when she came the rock-cut tomb, she "**SAW that the stone had been removed from the tomb**" (v1)

Palestinian archaeology shows that the entrance to such rock tombs, of which there were many around the city of Jerusalem, was on ground level through a small doorway, usually less than a yard high, so that adults had almost to crawl in to get into the burial chamber itself.

To prevent the tomb being disturbed by wild animals as also by curious passers-by, such tombs were sealed by a heavy boulder rolled across the entrance. The more elaborate tombs actually had a wheel-shaped slab of stone that rolled in a track across the entrance, rather like a sliding door.

When Mary saw **the stone** rolled to one side and then no doubt having stooped down & peeped in & discovered that the tomb was empty, her immediate reaction was to presume that the body of Jesus had been removed by some person or persons unknown.

I find it highly significant that Mary did not jump to the conclusion that Jesus had risen from the dead. **Mary came to the tomb expecting to find a body.**

Neither Mary nor any of the disciples ever expected to see Jesus again.

An unbiased reading of the Gospel narratives of the resurrection makes it abundantly clear that belief in the resurrection did not come about as a result of wishful thinking.

The thought that Jesus might have risen from the dead never occurred to Mary.

No doubt like any good Jew she believed in the resurrection of the dead, but this resurrection of the dead was to take place on the Last Day, at the end of time, not in the here and now.

So, perhaps not unnaturally, **Mary**, seeing no body, immediately **jumped to the wrong conclusion.**

"**They**", whoever 'they' might be, "**have taken the Lord out of the tomb**" (v2).

Since Mary, there have been many others who likewise have jumped to the wrong conclusion.

- Tertullian, an early Christian theologian living around the end of the 3rd century, mentioned a kind of 'shaggy-dog' story being put around by some of his non-Christian contemporaries to the effect that the local gardener, fearing that many visitors would come and damage his vegetables, removed JX' corpse from the tomb. On finding the tomb to be empty, the disciples wrongly concluded that resurrection had taken place. Apparently the gardener was supposed to have said nothing to disturb their 'good faith'!
- There have been those who have imagined some of the disciples themselves stole the body. Indeed, this theory is being peddled around today by A.N.Wilson - though why the disciples should then go on to die for a faith which they knew was based on a lie beats me.
- Probably the prize for the silliest explanation for the empty tomb must go to the theory that the corpse decomposed with unique speed, so that when Mary & the other women arrived on the third day there were simply no remains to be found.

Mary saw - and initially jumped to the wrong conclusion.

It was only later, when the Risen Lord actually appeared to her, that she came to realise how wrong she was.

2. Peter saw - and didn't now what to think

The second person to see was Peter.

John tells us that Peter and John who went to check out Mary's tale.

The clear implication is that they were amazed at this story.

They too, like Mary, expected Jesus to be still in his shroud.

There was a kind of a race between them.

John, probably the younger of the two, got to the tomb first. But for one reason or another he didn't go in initially - it has been suggested that perhaps he wanted to avoid the ritual contamination that came from touching a dead body. We don't know.

Whatever, it was Peter who went into the tomb first.

Peter, ever impulsive, showed no reticence about entering

John tells us: "**Simon Peter... went into the tomb. He SAW the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself**". (vv6b-7).

It must have seemed all very strange.

For had Mary been right and the corpse been removed, then this would have meant that the grave robbers had undressed the corpse.

But who in their right mind would go around with a naked corpse? It beggars belief.

John does not tell us what when on in Peter's mind.

However, according to Luke in his account of this incident, Peter "**went back home, amazed at what had happened**" (Lk 24.12).

Or as NIV puts it: "**he went away, wondering to himself what had happened**".

The fact is that "dead men don't rise". Yet Peter **saw** that the tomb was empty. Peter clearly did not know what to think. He was dumb-founded. Peter at this stage was like many others - an agnostic. He did not know what to believe. The empty tomb by itself did not convince. It took an appearance of the Risen Lord to convince him of the truth of the resurrection.

Yes, important at the empty tomb is, it is only part of the evidence for the resurrection. But *that evidence needs to be examined carefully*.

However, as Conan Doyle has Sherlock Holmes say: "*When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth*".

3. John saw - and believed

The reaction of John, the second disciple was very different from that of Mary & Peter. For when he went into the tomb, "**he SAW and believed**" (v8).

Why should John have believed?

- Did he believe simply on the basis that the grave clothes had not been removed?
- Or did he believe on the basis that the grave clothes had not been left in an untidy heap, but rather the shroud was in one place, and the head covering in another place?

John Chrysostom, the 4th century bishop of Constantinople: "*If anyone had removed the body, he would not have stripped it first, nor would he have taken the trouble to remove and roll up the napkin and put it in a place by itself*".

No robber is ever concerned with tidying up!

There is another possibility.

It may well have been the evangelist's intention to suggest that John saw *the grave clothes lying like a chrysalis* out of which the risen body of the Lord had emerged. Something happened to the body of Jesus, giving it new and marvellous powers. The body emerged from the grave clothes without disturbing them, leaving them intact. It is possible that the clothes around the body of Jesus remained firm on account of the aromatic oils & spices which had been wrapped in the linen grave clothes, so retaining their shape as when Jesus had occupied them.

John "**saw and believed**".

The empty tomb by itself did not convince.

However, the arrangement of the grave clothes together with the empty tomb caused him to believe.

Although, as the Gospel tells us, he like Peter, still **did not understand the Scripture** which pointed to the resurrection (v9), nonetheless it would seem that for John at least the penny had dropped - all of a sudden the earlier predictions of Jesus about suffering, dying & rising, began to make sense.

Yes, "**he saw and believed**".

Today we are no longer able to see the empty tomb - nor are we able to see physically the arrangement of the grave clothes. However, the evidence is still before us. The question is: **Will WE see and believe?**

George Bernard Shaw maintained that "*belief is literally a matter of taste*". But he was wrong. There is nothing whimsical about belief - or certainly nothing whimsical about Christian belief. **Christian belief is rooted in history** - or if it is not, then it is wishful thinking, and nothing more.

Some years ago Caroline & I were at a dinner where one of the distinguished guests was Professor JND Anderson, a distinguished academic lawyer. He wrote a book entitled: *A lawyer among the theologians*. He began by stating: "*The Resurrection is either the supreme fact in history, or else a gigantic hoax*". He then went on to examine the evidence of the Gospel records as also the theories of certain skeptical theologians. After carefully weighing the evidence, he concluded [with a quotation by a NT theologian called James Denney]: "*To say that the faith produced the message – that Jesus rose again in the souls of His disciples, in their resurgent faith and love, and that this, and this alone, gave birth to all of the stories of the empty grave and the appearances of the Lord to His own – is to pronounce a purely dogmatic judgment. What underlies it is not the historical evidence as the documents enable us to reach it, but an estimate of the situation dictated by a philosophical theory which has discounted the evidence before hand*"

This Easter Sunday morning, let me encourage you to "**see and believe**". Look at evidence yourself – see for yourself – and I believe if you are prepared to put prejudice aside to see, you will believe. What's more to see and to believe,

- You will not have to give up your intellectual faculties.
- will not have to shut your eyes and say "Yes, I see; yes I believe"

In this respect let me quote to you a Leader for Easter Eve from *The Times*, albeit published a few years ago: "*Our reasoning powers intact, our grasp of science and philosophy unshaken, we can possess the truth of the Resurrection - or rather, be possessed by it - by means of the gift of faith which is freely given to all who seek it. None needs make apology for accepting that gift, which enhances and does not diminish all that is human, the intellect included*" (6 April 1985)

Seeing can lead to believing. May that be true for all of us today.