

MATTHEW 28:1-8: THE WOMEN WHO STOOD BY JESUS

[Chelmsford Easter Day – March 31 – 2013]

It was Sherlock Holmes who said: “*When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth*”.

I.e. only those with closed minds can dogmatically say: “*Resurrections do not happen*”.

True, in the normal run of things dead people do not return to life – dead is dead, and that is that. But that still does not rule out the resurrection of Jesus.

This morning I want to look at the story of the first Easter Day – and at the claim Christians make that the tomb was empty and that Jesus was and is risen from the dead.

We haven’t got time to look at all the evidence

This morning I want us to look just at Matthew’s account. And even then, to limit ourselves by looking at just one strand of the story.

Over the last few weeks we have looked at some of the main characters in the story of the last of the last week or so of the life of Jesus: we have looked at Judas who betrayed him, Caiaphas who condemned him, Pilate who washed his hands of him, the crowds who rejected him, Peter who denied him, the soldiers who crucified him, and now today we shall look at the women who stood by him, even when the disciples ran away.

1. WOMEN CAME TO THE TOMB

It was women who were the first to discover the empty tomb and to receive the news of the resurrection of Jesus. All four Gospels agree on that.

In Matthew, only two women are mentioned: “**Mary Magdalene and the other Mary**”.

Who precisely this “**other Mary**” was we don’t know – possibly “**Mary, the mother of James and Joseph**”, whom Matthew mentions as having been present at the crucifixion (27.56). But in the end, it doesn’t matter who these women were.

The significant point is that it was women, and not men, who went to the empty tomb.

Even in our so-called PC world women can experience prejudice.

In spite of government directives about equal opportunities, many women discover that at work there is a so-called glass ceiling beyond which it is difficult to progress.

However, any difficulties women may experience today, are as nothing compared with what women encountered in the ancient world.

- Aristotle, the famous Greek philosopher, wrote: “*Females are imperfect males, accidentally produced by the father’s inadequacy or by the malign influence of a moist south wind*”
- The Rabbis used to say: “*Better that the words of the law should be burned than delivered to women*”.

On the whole, women had no standing in ancient society.

Furthermore, women were believed to be untrustworthy.

They were not allowed to give evidence in a Jewish court. To quote Josephus: “*From a woman let no evidence be accepted, because of the levity and temerity of their sex*”.

It was in this context that the Gospels writers tell us that on the Sunday morning after the Friday when Jesus had been put to death it was women who made their way to the tomb.

Here we have clear evidence that we are dealing here with history, and not with legend.

Nobody inventing the story of the empty tomb would have done it like that.

It would have made so much more sense for the early Christians to have said that the empty tomb was discovered by some pillar of the community like Joseph of Arimathea, described by Mark as **“a respected member of the Jewish Sanhedrin”**.

But as it was, Joseph simply gave his grave – it was women who went to the tomb first.

That very fact indicates that the Gospels writers were not into ‘spin’ – they are into telling the story as it really was.

2. THE WOMEN CAME TO LOOK

Why did these women go to the tomb?

According to Matthew, **“after the Sabbath, as Sunday morning was dawning went to look at the tomb”** (v1).

For Matthew’s contemporaries there was nothing strange about going to look at a tomb.

- It was customary for Jews to visit graves 'until the third day' in order to prevent premature burial.
- Indeed, according to one rabbinic source mourning was at its height on the third day.

The women therefore must have come with great sadness to look at the tomb of Jesus, expecting to see the cause of their grief only too well confirmed.

They went, as the angel at the tomb said, to **“look for Jesus, who was crucified”** (28.5).

There was no thought in their minds whatsoever that this Jesus might be no longer dead and buried. They **“went to look at the tomb”**, not to see whether it was empty or not, but simply in order to pay their respects to the dead Jesus.

“They went to look”.

Significantly the same word is found in Matthew’s account of the crucifixion.

For there Matthew wrote: **“There were many women there, looking on from a distance, who had followed Jesus from Galilee and helped him. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the wife of Zebedee”** (27.55,56).

I.e. the woman who came to look on Easter Day, were the women who came to look on Good Friday.

But what did they learn by looking on that Good Friday?

What did they understand when they looked at Jesus hanging there on a cross?

Almost certainly they looked at Jesus without comprehension.

They were just spectators, involved and yet not involved.

The same was initially true on Easter Day.

They came to look at the tomb, without any comprehension of what had happened to Jesus.

In some ways those women represent a good number of people who go to church, not least on Easter Sunday. They come to church to, as it were, pay their respects to Jesus.

For some, perhaps, going to church seems just the right thing to do

If the truth be told, they come with no expectations of meeting him.

They would not put it this way, but nonetheless to all practical intents & purposes as far as they are concerned, Jesus is still in his tomb.

Somehow a shift needs to take place in their understanding.

It is an interesting fact that the Greek verb used here for looking (*theoroun*) can be used in the sense not just of "looking at", but of "*perceiving*", "*noticing*", "*finding*":

Looking is not enough. Paying respects is not enough.

Understanding, comprehension is needed.

3. THE WOMEN CAME AND SAW

This need to see and understand is present, by implication at least, in the words of the angel to the women: **"I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has been raised, just as he said. Come here and see the place where he was lying"** (28.5,6)

"Come and see". It was as if the angel was inviting the women to "*Come and check out his announcement that the tomb was empty and that Jesus was alive*".

Here surely is a challenge to us all.

Instead of simply dismissing the story of the resurrection as some pious legend, at least do the Christian faith a courtesy of checking the story.

I have in my church office a book called '*Who moved the stone?*' The book was written by a London journalist, Frank Morrison. When Frank Morrison set out to write about the resurrection, he set out with the purpose of disproving the resurrection – for as he writes in his opening chapter, '*The Book that Refused To be Written*', he was convinced that "*His history rested upon very insecure foundations*".

But as he checked out the story, as he examined the facts, as he looked, he saw how wrong he had been. And so he ends the book with the words: "*There certainty is a deep and profoundly historical basis for that much disputed sentence in the Apostles' Creed – 'The third day he rose again from the dead'*".

Morrison has not been the only one to check out the story.

The oldest book I have on my bookshelves is dated 1749 - the 4th edition of a book by Gilbert West entitled *Observations on the History & Evidences of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ*.

West, a Cambridge graduate, set out to write a book highlighting what he believed would be the contradictions and discrepancies of the Gospels. But on examining the evidence he changed his mind. As a result on the title page he prints a verse from the Apocrypha:

"Blame not before thou has examined the truth; understand first and then rebuke"

Examine and understand the truth – come and see – check it out.

4. THE WOMEN WENT AND TOLD OTHERS

The women came and saw – and when they saw that the tomb was empty and understood that Jesus had indeed been raised from the dead, what did they do? **"They left the tomb in a hurry, afraid and yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples"** (28.8)

The women left the tomb with *a mixture of emotions*

- On the one hand, they were "**afraid**" in the sense that they were full of awe – and not surprisingly so – the resurrection of Jesus is truly 'awesome'. They realized that God was at work, and were overcome by the mystery of it all.

- But they were also “**filled with joy**”. And again, not surprisingly so. For Jesus, their friend, was alive. I doubt whether on that first Easter Day they had any inkling of the difference the resurrection would make to them & to all who believe. But later the truth will have sunk in. In the words of Peter, the resurrection of Jesus “**fills us with a living hope**” (1.4), and so we “**rejoice with a great and glorious joy which words cannot express**” (1.8).

Overflowing with joy, “**they ran to tell the disciples**”.

In a very real sense those women who discovered the empty tomb were “*the first missionaries of the church*” (Women’s Bible Commentary)

ANDREW – A WITNESS TO THE RISEN LORD JESUS

‘*All very interesting*’, you may say, ‘*but what has all this to do with today’s baptismal service?*’ After all, this morning we are not baptizing any women.

Rather we are baptizing Andrew – and he is very much a man. Just look at him.

You could well imagine him being a member of the TA – and if so, you are right. Indeed, just at the moment he is training for nuclear warfare. Andrew’s a man’s man.

And yet, when it comes to Jesus, he has three things in common with the women:

1. An ordinary guy

Just like those women who went to the tomb, so Andrew is a pretty ordinary guy.

Now in no way do I want to be disrespectful to him.

Certainly in the eyes of his wife Carol, he is a pretty special person.

But in the eyes of the wider world, they – like the rest of us – he is just another guy.

He isn’t a heart surgeon saving the lives of people every day

He isn’t a professional footballer earning stacks of money every week

He’s an ordinary working guy..

But I would like to suggest that his ordinariness is his strength.

Precisely because of who he is, he is a person with whom you & I can identify.

This in turn makes it easier for us to take him seriously. So when in a few minutes he comes to speak to us and tell us what Jesus means to him, I want you to listen to him carefully. For if Jesus means so much to him, he can mean the same to you too.

2. An ordinary guy who now believes in Jesus

Yes, Andrew believes in Jesus.

But this was not always so - like those women on that first Easter Day, he had to become convinced that there on the Cross Jesus died for him, & that at Easter Jesus rose for him.

Andrew has not always been a churchgoer

True, he went to a church school, but that was about it

But then he went on an Alpha course where he began to explore the Christian faith.

As a result, he now believes in Jesus

3. An ordinary guy who has the guts to tell others of Jesus

- Let's face it, it takes guts to be baptized – it takes guts to stand up before you and nail their colours to the mast.
- Before he is baptized, he will tell us what Jesus means to them. That takes guts too. And all the more so, since when Andrew was young he had some speech difficulties

But just as the women on the first Easter Day were so full of awe and joy at what God had done, that they hurried away to tell the disciples that Jesus was risen from the dead, so too Andrew is keen to tell us what Jesus means to them. So listen to him with carefully.

Incidentally, last December we baptised Paul Noonan – it was a result of Paul speaking to him on the train, that Andrew came to this church

Today we are baptizing Andrew – I wonder who as a result of what Andrew has to say will be baptized at a future baptismal service!

So, let me encourage you this morning to '**look**' and examine the evidence, the evidence that Andrew offers, the evidence of the church, the evidence of the Gospels, the evidence of the women.

Look – and discover the difference that Jesus made to the world not only on Easter Day – but the difference that he wants to make to your life too.