

Sharing the Good News

A sermon given on Easter Sunday, 4th April 2021 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst at the 9.30 Parish Communion and (adapted) at the Family Service.

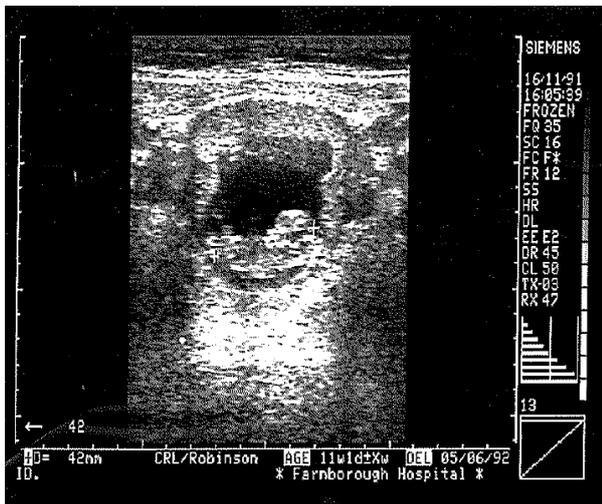
Reading: Mark 15:42-16:8

Good news, bad news

Think of a piece of news that someone told you, or that you had to tell to someone else. What was it like to receive this, or to share it?

There are two pieces of news that came to my mind, both relating to my family.

In 1991 George and I spent Christmas with my parents. On the first afternoon that we arrived at their house, over a cup of tea, we showed them some photos I had taken on our recent trip to France. And then I gave my mother this photograph:



You could see from the puzzled expression on her face that she had no idea what it was. Then she passed it to my Dad, who looked at it and became teary-eyed. He was looking at a photo of his first grandchild – an ultrasound scan picture of our son Simon at 12 weeks. This was our way of breaking the news to my parents that we were expecting our first child.

What about the bad news? Thinking of my Dad again, it was a phone call that I had with him 14 years later. We knew that Dad had been treated for cancer. But in this phone call he told me that the doctor had told him that it couldn't be cured, and he only had a few months left to live.

Both experiences were emotional, both for the person telling the news and for the person receiving it.

Mark's Gospel

The Easter story is full of both bad news and good news. Today we heard about the experience of three women, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of Joses and James, and Salome. They were three disciples of Jesus who had followed him from Galilee to Jerusalem. I don't think they were at the Last Supper, or in the Garden of Gethsemane with Jesus. But someone from the group of disciples had told them that Jesus had been arrested. That news must have been a terrible shock.

Maybe they were in the crowd when people were shouting for Jesus to be crucified. They were certainly there at the Cross when Jesus died, because Mark records that they followed Joseph of Arimathea to the tomb where Jesus' body was laid.

They knew what they had to do. It was the Jewish custom to treat the body of someone who had died with spices and ointments. They wouldn't be able to do anything on Friday evening, because the Sabbath was beginning, and the shops would be closed. But on Saturday evening they would buy what they needed and first thing on Sunday morning they'd be there at the tomb to give Jesus' body the dignity which he deserved, as an expression of their love for him.

Can you imagine what these sad and grieving women felt when they got to the tomb early on Sunday and found the stone rolled away? The tomb of their loved one had been disturbed. And then the body was gone! And there was an angel sitting right where Jesus' body had been.

The angel gives the women a message:

"go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." (16:7).

Did you notice that phrase "his disciples *and Peter*"? Peter, of course, *is* one of the disciples, in fact, Jesus' right-hand man. But Jesus specifically wants him to know that he is risen, because Peter will be feeling even worse than the other disciples: he didn't just run away, he had promised never to deny Jesus and that is precisely what he had done. Peter needed to know the good news, that Jesus was not only alive but would meet him again. And we know from John chapter 21 that in Galilee Jesus gave Peter the chance to say three times that he loved him, to put things right between them.

I wonder: is there one person that you know who needs to know good news about Jesus? To know that there is a reason for hope, that the past can be forgiven? Could you be the person to bring that good news to them?

So, did the women go straight to Peter and the other disciples to tell them the good news that Jesus had risen from the dead?

Mark records that the women are alarmed at the sight of the angel, and

...they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid. (Mark 16:8, NRSV)

And there the original version of the gospel ends. What a cliff-hanger! Was that the end of the story? No, we all know that there was more, which we find out from Matthew, Luke and John.

I don't believe that Mark intended to end his book there. Historically, it is very likely that Mark was writing in Rome at a time of persecution under Nero in the late 60s AD. Perhaps the last page of his book became detached, and Mark was

arrested or died, and so was unable to tell anyone what he had written. Perhaps he was even writing the last chapter when Roman soldiers burst into the house and arrested him. You will see in your bible two additional endings which have been added on by other hands, a shorter and a longer ending, both based on other material which is not entirely consistent with the other gospels that we have in our Bible, but which validates the story of the resurrection.

But what most intrigues me is the statement that the women said nothing to anyone because they were afraid. They clearly had no expectation that Jesus would rise from the dead, and the empty tomb experience shook them profoundly. But also, they clearly *did* recover sufficiently to tell of their experience – otherwise, how would Mark have known about it to write it down?

But suppose they hadn't? And suppose the other disciples had kept their experiences of the risen Christ to themselves? Would we even have heard of Jesus Christ two thousand years later?

Sharing the news today

And what about us? Like Mary, Mary and Salome in Mark's gospel, we may not have everything about Jesus clear in our heads. We may have a lot of questions about God's purposes, and why he has allowed us, or those we love, to suffer. The death of Jesus must have been the most traumatic experience for his friends and family. But later they came to make sense of it. And their experience of the risen Jesus and of knowing his presence continuing with them through the Holy Spirit enabled them to follow his teachings and his example, and give their lives to the service of God and others.

So what are we afraid of? We know how the story ends. We have two thousand years of testimony to the truth of the Christian message, not just in logical arguments but in lives lived in such a way that people encounter Jesus through his followers. There are so many people today who do not know the reality of the risen Jesus for themselves. So many who do not have the hope of eternal life, and who can't face death. There are so many who need to know that God loves them, and accepts them whatever they have done, just as Jesus forgave Peter. So many who need to know that Jesus died and rose again for them. Who is going to tell them? If we, who know the risen Jesus as our companion and Lord, do not share the good news, who will?

I know that in our culture it's very difficult to share your faith. We are afraid to tell because we don't want to be seen as pushing it down people's throats, or we're afraid we'll be looked on as religious nutters, or we just don't know what to say.

But I'm sure we can all find something to say, some way to show people the love of God which we've found in Jesus. We can share how prayer helps us, or how faith helps us to make sense of difficult times. Or we can just tell someone "I'll pray for you". I've never known anyone say "No, please don't do that!" Just that simple

sentence tells the other person that you believe there is a God, that he listens to us, and that you care about the other person. You never know where those few words might lead!

So let's have the confidence in the Easter message. It is true. *Christ is risen! He is risen indeed, Alleluia!* Spread the news!