

There is a mystery at the heart of things...

Easter Sermon
“There is a mystery at the heart of things”
Luke 24: 1-12

It is quite a way to go from those terrified women who bowed down to the ground in disbelief and shock to the joyful dance in the churches on Easter morning. Let us therefore start with these women, and at the end of the story hopefully discover the dance. Let us start with the searching for the dead body and by following these Easter people's story let us discover the risen Christ and life eternal.

There is a mystery at the heart of things. Especially at the heart of everything that's got to do with Easter.

The mystery at the heart of Luke's story of the resurrection is a strange absence, the mystery of the empty tomb, the mystery of the absence of the body of Jesus. There is – shockingly enough – nothing else.

There is no early morning encounter in the garden as John tells us with Mary's story. No question “where somebody might have taken him”, no Jesus saying “Mary”, and no Mary replying and recognising and trying to hold him...

Can you see what I mean?

Luke is feeding our hope for resurrection with the absolute minimum.

He simply reports Christ's absence from the place where the women had expected him to be. And: there are angels.

Angels, - men in dazzling white clothes who give the women the shock of their lives. And who then tell them that they are looking in the wrong place.

“Why do you look for the living among the dead?”

The mystery at the heart of Easter is the experience that Christ is not where we expect him to be. He is gone. Betrayed and on trial, tortured and crucified...

He is not where we put him... safe in a box, protected in churches, limited through our narrow-mindedness and bound by our lack of imagination.

No. Christ is not there.

He is bleeding and suffering with the many, many people who bleed and suffer in this world; he is with those we cause to suffer, and he is with us, when we suffer ourselves.

Wherever and whenever Christ is absent from the places we expect him to be, it is actually because he is already **with** us.

He is gone. And in that absence he is more present among us than we may have ever thought.

On that first Easter morning, Christ was not where the women had expected him to be. He was dead and his body had been laid in the tomb.

Through the long day of the Sabbath the women who had been among his closest friends, who had watched him die in agony, had waited to do for him all that they could still do: anoint his body, preserve it with spices, wrap it in linen cloths and lay it to rest... They'd hoped by doing this, they could help their own and his suffering come to an end. They'd hoped to then see his terrible agony finally stilled by the burial.

Jesus had been with them. And had lived with them.

There is a mystery at the heart of things...

They had watched with horror as he suffered and died before them.
And there was nothing more for them to do.
Perhaps their only hope was that the ritual, familiar act of preparing the body
might bring them some consolation and comfort.
That's why they'd gone to the tomb.
And then he wasn't there.

He's gone. But where to?
In this whole deep and mysterious emptiness come two messengers of God,
asking them to look again – somewhere else.
“Why do you look for the living among the dead?”
As if saying: Look for Christ not in the tomb where you laid him, look for Christ
in the midst of life and among the living.
It is also Luke, who offers in his gospel the stories of the disciples walking on the
road to Emmaus, and a little later welcoming fishermen back to the shore frying
fish for them while the sun just begins to rise.

Look for Christ, not dead, but alive, with the living.
And by doing so, experience hope breaking through despair, light breaking
through darkness, joy breaking through grief.
Just as Psalm 30 expresses this so beautifully:
The tears of the night
turn to joy with the dawn.
You have changed my sadness
to a joyful dance.
You have taken away my sorrow
and surrounded me with joy.
My soul will sing your praise
and never be silent.
O God, my God,
I will give you thanks forever.

Christ is not gone!
He is simply absent from the place of death. And just through that he is present –
everywhere – still fully alive!

The mystery of Easter is the surprising message that death is not the end.
This is the mystery of our faith and the mystery of faith of many who lived before
us: Christ has died, and Christ is risen.
In Jesus' absence there is a presence.
The empty tomb is not a “gone away”, but a “come back”,
proclaiming the arrival of a risen Christ into our lives.
The mystery today is the Christ within me and you. Within our past, our
presence and our future. He is still disturbing and unsettling, and at the same
time comforting and caring, filling our lives with an amazing – if not to say again
“mysterious” – peace.
Christ is absent and yet present.
Christ is crucified and dead, but Christ is risen and alive.

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The women at the tomb felt the absence.
And it is in this absence that they are called to believe...
They don't see Christ at the tomb and in the garden as Mary did.
Such experience is left to the two disciples making their weary way to Emmaus.
The women here experience only the emptiness of the tomb and the reminder of Christ's promise.
And they believe!
They believe what they have heard.
They believe that this absence means more than an end, more than an emptiness, more than a predictable end to an unpredictable story.
They believe this, and then they turn. And they run.
And they tell their story to the others...

But: the women's news of absence and promise is not what the other disciples expect to hear.
And then it comes, as it did and does often in history: These men with whom the women share their story, are certain that the women cannot be trusted as witnesses.
They do **not** believe.
Or do they?
What makes Peter run to the place from where they come?
Peter – always fast at acting, but not at reflecting - , Peter runs to the place of the tomb – surely expecting to prove the women wrong? Perhaps to see for himself?
And: he sees... What?
Nothing. Nothing but an absence. Some spread about linen cloths. But no angels.
Just the empty tomb.
And, he is amazed, Luke tells us.
Amazed?

How would we feel?
Wouldn't we want to see for ourselves, too?

I must say, I think the great temptation of Easter is not to believe.
The great temptation of Easter is to ask for proof; to ask for explanations; and to try to explain.
The great temptation of Easter is to want to make everything safe and predictable, nice and easy to understand.
The great temptation of Easter is to bind God's actions to the way we think and to the way we understand the world works.
Don't you agree?

We have a tendency to put everything neatly in its place, labelled, sorted and explained... and by doing so we lock the risen Christ up in the boxes of our thinking and expecting, of our research and our theories.
I believe, we have all tried that at some point. And then had to realize: Christ didn't stay where we'd safely stored him away.
Life as a Christian just doesn't work like that.
(pause)

There is a mystery at the heart of things...

The risen Christ breaks out of our categories.

He breaks down our definitions, and he rolls away the stones from our minds.

He reveals things that we thought were clear and safe to suddenly be empty.

He shows us how life moves on, keeps changing, keeps changing us... at times leaving us with nothing – and yet, with so much:

Jesus Christ leaves us with the demand that we look for him in the other places.

He calls us to start again.

And he promises us that if we follow his call away from the tomb, out into the world, that then and there we will over and over again meet the living God!

It is all a bit mysterious – you may now think.

But maybe you can agree that this is the most appropriate way to talk about Easter and its mystery.

There are more questions than answers.

More wonder than certainty.

More amazement than clear facts.

But isn't that what makes life with Jesus Christ so exciting?

So special?

So precious and unique?

He simply asks us to always be open for the new, the different, the unexpected,... the elsewhere!?

How will, let me ask this today, how will the absence that is the presence of Christ, lead us to new life?

How will the empty grave lead us to sharing with each other the living love of a God who overcomes death?

How will the message that Christ is in the midst of life and not at the place of death, influence our talking and acting? ...so that who meets us, meets the healing and reconciling side of the God who raised Jesus from the dead?

How can we believe?

And how can we then live out and share with others what we believe?

Where do we look for God in our own lives?

And where do empty spaces encourage us to move on and look elsewhere?

And last but not least:

where are – on this Easter morning in 2008 – our new beginnings?

May our response to the mystery of Easter simply be to **seek** answers to these questions.

...to be open to the new and unexpected.

May our response to the mystery of Easter be:

not to seek Christ only in the places we expect him, where we are sure to find him, but expect him ahead of us.

May we not be shocked but happily surprised when we find doors open, stones rolled away, cloths thrown to the ground and graves empty!

May we see a liberation in the emptiness of the tomb and in the absence of Christ's body on Easter morning:

We are freed. And we are free – to meet Jesus just everywhere!

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Because: "...they buried my body and they thought I'd gone, but I am the dance and I still go on. They cut me down and I leapt up high, I am the life that'll never, never die. I'll live in you, if you'll live in me: I am the Lord of the dance said he. Dance then wherever you may be; I am the Lord of the dance said he. And I'll lead you all wherever you may be, and I'll lead you all in the dance, said he."

May God
who dances
in the storms
and the sunlight
keep you
and cherish you
in mercy
and love.
Amen.