

Sermon for Sunday 26 April 2020 - Easter 3

One of the more pleasant things about our current situation is that I've found myself having more time to read...and not just what I would consider 'work' material, but also some 'just for fun' books. During this past week, I finished reading the book 'Endurance' by Alfred Lansing, which is a fascinating account of Sir Ernest Shackleton's expedition to the Antarctic. I was reading from the comfort of my sofa in a warm, dry house, but the descriptions were so vivid, I found myself shivering with the cold and getting that sinking feeling of anxiety every time they set out on another journey in their small boats. I won't go into the whole story, but it's worth reading. What I want to point out, though, and what I find an interesting parallel to today's Gospel reading, is the moment described as part of the book's epilogue when Shackleton returns from an impossibly long journey in a last-ditch bid for rescue. He took a small team in an open boat and left 22 others behind on the tiny Elephant island. Those left behind spent four months speculating about what had become of the rescue team, and they had pretty much given up hope of success, so it was a pretty big shock when Shackleton suddenly appeared one afternoon with a rescue ship and the whole ordeal was over. In an instant, they went from being convinced he was lost at sea to seeing him standing there large as life on the deck of the ship that would take them home.

And so it is with some of the resurrection narratives in the Gospel accounts. Think of John's account of Mary Magdalene at the tomb: one minute she thinks Jesus is dead and she's pleading with the gardener to tell her where someone has moved the body, and suddenly she realises she's talking to the resurrected Jesus...no explanation, no theological underpinning, just her whole world shifting in an instant with

understanding to follow much later. So what's noticeably different about today's reading from Luke about the disciples on the road to Emmaus is that they don't get this same kind of instantaneous revelation...one minute they think Jesus is dead and buried, and the next minute they know he is risen. Yes, there is a moment of recognition at the end of the account when suddenly all the pieces fall into place and they recognise Jesus, but think about all that has led up to that moment of recognition.

These disciples started out thinking they had the right perspective, that they knew what reality had to be, and that's what they're talking about as they start their journey from Jerusalem. They had high hopes for Jesus, that he was a great prophet, that he would be the one to rescue Israel from Roman oppression. They had been his loyal followers, absolutely convinced of his role as Messiah. But to them a Messiah looks like a conquering hero; a Messiah leads the people to victory and ends his conquest on a throne. But Jesus was conquered; Jesus was led away by the Romans and ended his reign on a cross. That couldn't possibly be a Messiah. Even if these crazy rumours were true that he had somehow survived the whole thing, how could victory possibly be salvaged from this defeat? Like the castaways on Elephant Island, they think their understanding is the only possible explanation that is realistic.

So that's what they tell this stranger they meet on the road, who somehow hasn't heard about recent events. And based on the other resurrection accounts, this is the point at which we might expect Jesus to reveal himself...to bring about that instantaneous transformation from sadness to joy. But he doesn't...he continues the journey with them and walks them through a reinterpretation of what they thought they understood. He slowly shifts their perspective by explaining the events

they have described through the long lens of God's covenant and the history of salvation, and in doing so he refocuses their understanding of what a Messiah is. And what he does in this explanation is present to them a reality that cannot possibly end with defeat on a cross, but moves through that to the victory of resurrection. From this perspective, resurrection is an inevitable conclusion of the fulfilment of Scripture... there can't possibly be any other explanation. Of course, there is still a moment of joyful revelation when they finally recognise him in the breaking of bread, but he's prepared them for this on their journey with an understanding of what his resurrection means; unlike Mary Magdalene, they are given an explanation, a theological underpinning.

Now I know for all of us this has been a really unusual Lent and Easter, possibly the most unusual of our lives. It's disorientating for many of us to celebrate Easter without gathering in our church buildings and proclaiming the resurrection together. Most years, our celebration of Easter is a lot like most of the resurrection narratives in the Gospel...one minute we're in the dark, quiet solemnity of Good Friday and then move suddenly into the bright, happy noise of Easter. In an instant, we move from the sadness of the crucifixion to the joy of the resurrection. But this year it feels different, and what I'm suggesting is that maybe this year our experience is more like the road to Emmaus. Maybe this year Easter is coming to us a bit more gradually but with more time for understanding.

See, we all have our own perspective on what's going on right now. For some of us, not much has changed except that we're not spending time with people outside our household. For some, this has been an unexpected pleasure and an opportunity to catch up on reading and gardening and other pursuits that have taken a back burner in our busy

lives away from home. But for others, this has been a time of unspeakable anxiety and loneliness and might even feel like the end of the world as we know it. Each of these perspectives feel to us like reality, like the truth. And how Easter relates to it all probably depends largely on where we see God in the current situation. What I think we're being offered in this year of gradual Easter is the opportunity to delve a bit deeper into that understanding. We have a perspective we think is true, but maybe God wants to walk us through recent events from a different perspective. And the only way that can happen is by spending time listening to God, through prayer and Scripture and just quiet time carved out of our day.

We live in a society that has become used to having things right away... we're not used to having to wait or coming to thing gradually. It's frustrating for most of us to now be living in a situation where we can't simply walk into a store whenever we would like or go off on a holiday we've been planning for months. The suddenness of a typical Easter actually suits us...in fact many Christians these days kind of skip over the meditations of Holy Week and move straight on to the Easter message. So we've been given a rare opportunity this year. We've been forced to wait, we've been forced to accept a gradual Easter...and because of this, we've been offered a chance to get a really good look at it, to come to a better understanding of what the resurrection means for us, and by doing so to find ourselves much closer to the God who raised Christ from the dead...for us. Amen.