John 20:1-18
Easter Day 2016

Graveyards are strange places, in that they bring up different emotions for different people. For the recently bereaved, they can be places of grief and sadness, For the historian, they are places of interest and data collection, For children, they can be playgrounds; great for hide and seek. Graveyards bring up a range of emotions in us, depending on our life experience.

Mary Magdalene came to the graveyard that Sunday morning with a mixture of emotions about graveyards.

Only a week before, she had been standing in another graveyard - the one where a tomb housed their friend Lazarus. Now that had been a visit to a graveyard she would never forget: Lazarus had been ill for a while and Mary and Martha, his sisters, had called on Jesus to come and heal him but Jesus had dallied on the way, taking too long to arrive and by the time he got there, Lazarus was dead. Mary and Martha were beside themselves with grief and were angry that Jesus hadn't responded quicker.

But little did they know what incredible miracle was about to happen. Jesus drew near to Lazarus' tomb and called him out and within a matter of minutes their brother stood before them, back from the dead. Jesus had wowed the crowd by raising Lazarus from the dead: an incredible display of his authority and power.

The graveyard was a good place to be that day! The graveyard was a place of victory, a place of miracles, a place of uncontained joy.

But that was seven days ago.

A lot can happen in seven days…

The triumphal entry in Jerusalem had soon resulted in opposition. The crowd had turned, the mood had soured, and then the atrocities of Good Friday dealt a crushing blow to the hopes and dreams of Mary and her friends.

How could it all have gone so wrong?

Had the last three years been for nothing?

What about the brave new world that Jesus had promised? What about the least becoming first? What about this new world order where the meek would inherit the earth? What about this promise of life in all its fullness? These words seemed to ring hollow for Mary now as she stood in the graveyard.

Last week, she had been in a graveyard that spoke to her of victory and joy. This week, she stands in a graveyard that speaks to her of defeat and loss. How could it all have gone so wrong?

And so Mary moves towards the tomb of Jesus and grief consumes her heart. John reminds us of that in verse 1 when he comments, "It was still dark". The sunrise had yet to happen, both physically and metaphorically: for Mary, in body and soul, "It was still dark".

And she arrives at the tomb and, to her horror, the stone has been removed lifted out of the groove in which it had been placed. Mary is beside herself in fear and sadness. This is the final humiliation, the final betrayal by the authorities: what has Jesus done that they should treat him with such lack of respect? It was more than enough to have him arrested. It was more than enough to have him put on trial. It was more than enough to have him publicly flogged and tortured. It was certainly more than enough to have him crucified. But now it seemed that grave robbers have taken the body - and who wouldn't bet their last denarius on the Roman authorities being behind this despicable ruse?

So she runs off the tell Simon Peter and John the terrible news and she is convinced that Jesus' body has been mistreated in death just as badly as it had been in life.

Simon Peter and John run to the tomb. John gets there first, he bend over, he peers inside – but he didn't dare to go in. No such bashfulness with Simon Peter: always a man in a hurry, he reaches the tomb and goes straight inside and sees the linen cloths which had been wrapped around Jesus' body.

For the first time, there is an indication that something very special has taken place. When Lazarus was raised from the dead, he came out of the tomb still wrapped in his linen cloths. But this scene is now looking very different. The cloths are neatly folded, the napkin for the head is in a separate place. This is a carefully laid out scene, designed to show the disciples and followers that something unique has taken place…

Lazarus had been resuscitated but Jesus has been resurrected, and the two events are quite different…And grasping that point, that Jesus was not merely resuscitated but resurrected, is at the very heart of the Easter story and what we believe as Christians. Because in the next verse, John says of himself, in the third person as usual, “He saw and believed”. There’s two things to note about this comment.

First, it seems he is comparing himself rather favourably with the disciple Thomas who, in a few verses time, says: “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it.” What a contrast between the faith of John and Thomas.

But I think there’s something even more profound about this comment, which takes us to the very heart of the passage this morning. John is confronted by an empty tomb – and he sees and believes. He doesn’t even have to see the risen Christ to believe: the empty tomb is enough…

And I think that’s a key point for us all as Christians, and for those of us here today who may not consider ourselves Christians, that the empty tomb is enough: the empty tomb is the basis of our faith. We don’t need to see great miracles to believe. We don’t need to have profound answers to prayer to believe. We don’t need writing in the sky or a vision of Jesus to believe.

The empty tomb is enough…

The empty tomb is the greatest miracle of all.

The empty tomb is the most profound answer to humanity’s deepest question.

The empty tomb is God’s message to us.

The empty tomb is enough…

“He saw and believed”. And John stresses this by the way in which he uses the word ‘saw’ in verses 5 and 6.

In verse 5, we read that John bent over, looked in and saw the strips of linen. The Greek word used for ‘saw’ here has to do with the eye – to physically see. But in verse 6, we read that Peter went into the tomb and saw the strips of linen. But the Greek word used for ‘saw’ in this verse is different and it has more to do with contemplating an event. And then, in verse 8, we read that, “He saw and believed”, and now a third Greek word for ‘saw’ is used, which has more to do with spiritual insight and understanding.

And so, in these three verses, John uses one idea, ‘to see’ - and he uses three different Greek words for that action to describe the spiritual journey that each one of us goes on in the light of the empty tomb of Jesus.

We see the facts.

We contemplate the facts.

We understand the spiritual implication of those facts.

The journey of faith into which we are all called this Easter Morning: see, contemplate, understand. But as we go through this process of seeing, contemplating and understanding, it would be wrong to suggest that the empty tomb gets rid of all our doubts; that the empty tomb makes it easy to believe: of course it doesn’t. All of us continue to have doubts and wrestle with poor understanding about God. And that’s exactly what we see in this Easter story…

The disciples leave the tomb and go back to where they had come from with confusions running through their minds. And Mary is left alone at the tomb – weeping and mourning her loss. We might well ask how the disciples, 11 men brave and true can leave a woman at a graveside in great distress, particularly as the word John uses here for crying indicates wailing and sobbing but that’s by the by…

Mary stays behind and, in her grief, bends over and peers inside, presumably to see if it really is true or not…And what she sees shocks the life out of her! Now there are two angels in white, seated where Jesus had been laid: how much more weird can her day become?

“Woman, why are you weeping?” they ask. And as soon as she answers, she turns round and sees Jesus standing there. But she doesn’t recognise him and he asks her the same question but also adds a vital second question: “Woman, why are you weeping? Who is it you seek?”

What a profound question!

Perhaps the same question could be asked of each one of us today. We have bothered to get out of bed this Easter morning and we have bothered to come to church. Why? Who do you seek?

And, as Jesus asks here this question, she thinks he’s the gardener and her utter devotion to her beloved Lord shines through in her response: “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him”. Mary never pauses to think how she will move the corpse of

a full-grown man. She just wants to do what is right by Jesus because she loves him so much. And, in response to this overwhelming sign of devotion, Jesus reveals his identity to her. And there is a real intimacy to this moment: when Jesus reveals himself to us, he calls us by name. We hear Jesus call us by name – and it is enough.

Who do you seek? The Messiah who calls you by name this morning…

And then Jesus gives Mary a command: "Do not hold on to me…" Some have taken this to mean that Mary is not allowed to touch the resurrected body of Jesus, but I don't think it means that at all…The tense Jesus uses here suggests a repeated or continuous action, so I think he is speaking metaphorically to Mary and to us: Don't cling on to Jesus of Nazareth, do not think that the earthly story of Jesus is all there is to it. It's amazing how many people do that, how many people revere the earthly Jesus as if he were a good man or a fine prophet or a moral example to us all. And he was all those things – but he was more than that: he still is more than that…We are not to cling on to our ideas of the earthly Jesus, but we are to allow him to ascend to the Father. And he has to ascend to the Father so the story can be completed: once he ascends, the Holy Spirit can be sent and, eventually, Jesus can return again in judgement and salvation.

So Mary runs to the disciples with the news and proclaims to them: "I have seen the Lord!" And surprise, surprise, a fourth Greek word is used here for 'to see', and the tense used implies that the seeing will have ongoing implications for her future.

So this passage takes us on a spiritual journey; a journey through which we see more and more clearly. First, we see the physical evidence of the empty tomb. Second, we contemplate the evidence of the empty tomb. Third, we develop spiritual understanding and insight about the resurrection. Finally, we see the implications of that for our future lives.

Jesus said to Mary, "Who do you seek?"

Jesus says to each one of us today, "Who do you seek?" "What do you see?" "Have you grasped the implications of the resurrection?"

Where are you on the journey of faith? Have you seen? Have you contemplated? Have you understood? Then complete the Easter story in your own life and grasp the implications of the resurrected Christ for your own life. Because the resurrected Christ brings us forgiveness. The resurrected Christ brings us wholeness and healing. The resurrected Christ brings us a new identity and fullness of life.

The Easter story is not one to be confined to the history books: it is a living experience for each one of us as we learn to truly see Christ for who he is and the impact he can have on our lives.

Who do you seek? Who do you see?

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus simply said: "Seek and you will find".