

## Reflection for Sunday 4 April, Easter Day

According to the Mental Health Foundation, a common response to the prospect of the lifting of lockdown has been fear and anxiety. It took a lot of emotional energy to cope with lockdown, they argue, and it may take just as much to emerge from it. The best way to cope, they say, is not to hurry, to pace yourself, focus on the present and talk to people you trust.

Fleeing was, perhaps, not the best thing to do, but the two Marys and Salome who came to the tomb early that first Easter morning, did what most of would do when confronted by evidence of the power of God. And we can hardly blame them for taking time to gather themselves before they spoke to anyone else about their experience – though Mark doesn't tell us about quite how that happened.

Fear isn't just about our response to an obvious danger, it's about how we react when the way we look at the world is called into question and when our assumptions and behaviours are undermined. Fear is the natural response to a shattering experience.

The abrupt ending of Mark's Gospel fills us not just with uncertainty but with awe and wonder. We don't fully understand what's happening and what it all might mean, but it is clear that something has happened that we can't ignore and which has a huge potential to impact our lives, in ways that we can't quite yet get our heads around.

There is much scholarly debate about whether or not Mark really did intend his Gospel to end at this point. Two alternative additional endings, printed in brackets in most Bibles, are clearly the work of later hands. Has the original ending of Mark been lost, or did he intend to leave us on a knife edge in the way that a film-maker today might well have imagined? We shall never know, but I for one, find the abrupt, dramatic ending that we have been left emotionally and spiritually satisfying.

Throughout Mark's Gospel Jesus has met people who don't do what he tells them. Usually, he asks them to stay quiet and wait. The irony of this final story is that when the angel does tell the women to report what they've witnessed they stay silent. Their silence, awe and terror has the power to draw us into the story in a more compelling way than do the resurrection stories in the other Gospels of the appearances of the risen Jesus to his friends.

It's almost as if it's left up to us to make the connections and tell the story. The women are told to travel to Galilee to find Peter and the other disciples. And it's up to us to find ways of telling this story today that will change the lives of those we encounter. It reminds us that it's always up to us to respond and to try to find fresh

ways of telling the good news of the love that is stronger even than death itself. We're called to go on a journey.

This, then, is a story that having finished, doesn't leave us to sit back with a smile, enjoying the happy ending, but prompts us instead to sit up, get up and start again.

It's about new beginnings. And in a strange way, because it's open-ended, we may find that we are in for still more surprises. The end of the story isn't yet clear. It chimes in with Isaiah's prophetic words, much quoted in our diocese recently: 'I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?'

It helps too to give substance to our talk about a 'transformation agenda' for our churches, because transformation is always on the agenda. And transformation is certainly not, we learn, an ever more desperate attempt of a failing institution to prop itself up with shallow optimism, for transformation lies at the very heart of the Easter message.

But let's not pretend that transformation and new beginnings are easy. They can also be both disturbing and scary, and because they're scary, this can be terribly debilitating. The common response to fear, as we've seen in the reaction to Covid can be to make us less willing to take risks, more conformist and conservative, more tribalistic, less accepting of diversity and eccentricity, harsher and more judgemental.

Easter challenges us to stand firm against and to overcome those responses, and in the words of the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams it leads us to 'the recreating of a relationship of trust and love on the far side of the most extreme human realities, suffering, abandonment, death.' But as he also points out, faith in the crucified and risen Jesus demands patience and bravery on the part of those who wish to rediscover that life-giving relationship. The story isn't over yet.

As we emerge this Easter from the debilitating restraints of lockdown and gradually learn to cope with our fears induced by the pandemic, the first Easter story offers us not only a timely, stark, but oddly reassuring reminder that we humans often fail when we come face to face with the reality of God, but that we also really do have a way forward in the obedience to the call to go and look for God in Christ at work in our broken and contradictory world.

We can learn to trust not only God, but one another again and find new hope to sustain us. We can then, truly, and from the bottom of our hearts, proclaim the truth that Christ is risen indeed and, in that hope, find fulfilment, peace and meaning – every new day.