

Easter 2021
Easter Sunday, 4 April 2021
High Street Uniting Church Frankston
David Fotheringham

Bible reading: John 20: 1-18

*Faithful God, whose word is life: come with saving power to free our praise, inspire our prayer and shape our lives for the kingdom of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.***

Do you know the story of “The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe”? ... and, more broadly, the Narnia series by C.S. Lewis? In the first book of the series, some children from earth get to witness the creation of the new world. God, in the form of Aslan the Lion, sings the dawn into being. It is at God’s behest that the sun first rises.

This mirrors the stories of Genesis, where we also hear how God prepared a garden for new, human creatures God made – a garden for humans to tend and enjoy, and where God and humans could walk and converse together and develop their relationship. As the story goes, of course, the humans end up ashamed and trying to hide from God when they hear God walking in the garden.

It is surely fitting that this first Easter story is set in a garden – this time, by a tomb that was found to be empty.

Notwithstanding the almost comical footrace between Peter and the other disciple to get to the tomb to see for themselves, most of this story proceeds rather gently. After the year that we’ve had in 2020, it seems to me that there’s something in the gentle approach of the story of Mary Magdalene and Jesus, that is good for us, this year. We need this gentleness. In so many ways the church and community is still in the process of grieving, of working out what the new normal is, and of working out how to engage with life around us when there is still a great deal of flux.

When Mary goes into this garden it’s not even clear if she knows what she’s doing. In the very least she’s grieving a loss, barely beginning a process of working out what to do next, or how to process her emotions – so much has been changing so fast. She goes into this garden and finds that the situation has changed again! How often have we faced that?! We think we’re free of COVID, and then we’re not, and then we’re in lockdown, and then we don’t need masks (we think)...

For Mary, Jesus had been popular, mostly, and so significant in her life and then suddenly it was dangerous to be with him, and then he was killed; and then he was entombed so quickly before the Sabbath, and *now* she finds the tomb has been opened... there’s grief and loss and the situation keeps changing... what to do? What to do?

Having looked in the tomb, she turns around and Jesus is there. And sometimes we don't recognise him. We think we are stuck, or we're overcome by anxiety, or we're juggling as hard as we can not sure if we're making headway, and even if he's there we don't recognise him. And what cuts through is when we are called by name.

Have you ever been at a party or in a noisy room and someone across the room says your name in another conversation and suddenly they've got your attention? It's called the cocktail party effect. We're attuned to our names, so One speaking our name can cut through and call us back to stop and listen – especially when it is someone who knows us, and calls us.

In this case, Jesus says, "Mary". But she is a proxy for all of us, and on this Easter Day as we celebrate the significance of the Easter dawn, we, in our own experience in this time, are invited to hear our name too from the risen Lord who calls to us, to cut through to us, to bid us to listen.

God knows us, each of us, probably better than we know ourselves. And we know ourselves best when we know who we are in relationship to God. Let me say that again: We know ourselves best when we know who we are in relationship to God.

Because Mary's response of recognition in the garden is significant – which is underlined by the text adding an explanatory note to it. Do you remember the word she uses? She says to him "Rabbouni!" - Rabbouni, which means teacher.

In that one word she not only identifies him, but says something about their relationship: "teacher, my teacher" also means "I am your disciple". Is that our response?

And what's even more is that the risen Jesus adds that just as he calls God his Father, so it is for her: *she* is a daughter of God; *she* is a sister of Jesus.

We know ourselves best when we know who we are in relationship to God.

There is a wonderful dignity in this: child of God; and a wonderful humility: learner from Jesus.

At a time when in Australia we are dealing with a long overdue reckoning over the treatment of women, this dignity needs to be heard. And if we are to be a part of the solution we need to be learners from Jesus – learners about courage in speaking truth to power, learners about faith and integrity and respect, learners about justice and inclusion and care. We aren't there yet.

But if the first name ascribed to the risen Jesus is teacher, my teacher, then the first name ascribed by the risen Jesus to us - to you - is child of God, my sibling.

The pandemic has taken us into a very unsettled, isolating, and at times dangerous space. This Easter Sunday reading brings us back into the garden, and into the presence of the One who sang the dawn into being, calling light out of darkness and life out of death. The creative work of that One is not finished yet. The transformation of Easter is not just about Jesus – who rose from death, hallelujah! – but not only that, we are transformed as we name him as our teacher and name ourselves as learners from him; and when we are called his siblings.

Christ is risen, and is with us in bringing the life of God's kingdom into this new normal that we are entering, where things seem so much the same but the ground keeps shifting. But as with Mary, so with us: God's gentle but relentless transforming of the world begins anew.