The Day that Changed the World
John 20:1-22

Without question there have been days that have changed the course of history. Days like 9:11, and the subsequent War on Terror; or September 3rd 1939, Britain declares war on Germany. But there are also days which, if not exactly history upending, are life changing, like the day you passed your driving test, or got the job, or got married, or your child was born. Days after which nothing is ever quite the same again.

And yet, of all such days, none compares to the first Easter Sunday. Because whatever you think happened then, whether you are an agnostic or a Christian, it's hard to dispute how that one day has left an indelible mark on humanity. Because it's that day that explains how Christianity conquered an empire, and how multiple, and diverse, societal goods have flowed from it. Like the concept of human rights, or prison reform, or the emancipation of slaves, or the protection of the unborn, the newborn and the elderly.

And there's a reason for that. And that is that the first easter Sunday has proved life and history changing because its heart changing. You see, in today's passage, Jesus asks Mary two incredibly poignant questions, v15, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" And it's understanding the answer to those two questions that has the power to explain why the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth from the dead is the answer to your doubts, to your tears, to your fears and to the seeming pointlessness of life.

The Answer to Your Doubts
Look at v1, 'On the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark.' Now, what do you think Mary was looking for when she went to the tomb that morning? It's what everyone who goes to a tomb or a grave is looking for, isn't it? Someone she cares about has died, in Jesus' case executed, and she's going to honour his body. Except, when she gets there, v1, she 'saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb.' And she knows that can only mean one thing. So she runs and tells Peter and John, v2, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him."

Look at those verbs: *they have taken the Lord… they have laid him…* She doesn't think Jesus has walked out, does she? The stone has been moved, the tomb is empty, so someone must have carried Jesus' dead body out and put it somewhere else. And she repeats that unerring logic to the angels when she returns. They ask her, v13, '"Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him."' And without knowing who she's taking to, thinking he's the gardener, she says to Jesus, v15, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him."

So, when Jesus asks her, v15, "Whom are you seeking?" The answer's obvious, isn't it? She's seeking a corpse. She's seeking a dead Jesus. She did not go to the tomb the way you came here - with a spring in your step, ready to sing some great songs and rejoice in the triumph of Christ. She'd watched Jesus die and she was here to tend his dead body.

So, this morning, if you have doubts about the Christian faith, maybe you're investigating Christianity or, maybe you're a Christian but you're wobbling, look at Mary. And ask yourself the question Jesus asks her: Who was she seeking? What was she doing there? And yet that woman's life was transformed beside that tomb. Why? Because she was seeking a corpse, what she found was Jesus risen from the dead.

But it's not just what Mary was seeking that should make you doubt your doubts, it's who she is. Because she's a woman. A woman whose testimony, if she was in court, no one would have listened to - because she was a woman. So if you were John, and you were making this up - you'd never have a woman as your number one star witness to the resurrection, would you? So why does he have her as his number one star witness? Because she was. Because this is what happened.

Ok, but if Mary wasn't expecting this, neither were Peter and John: v9, '*For as yet they did not understand the Scripture*, that he must rise from the dead.' Just like Mary didn't go to the tomb in eager expectation, so they weren't sat at home on the edge of their seats waiting for someone to burst in, saying, 'it's happened, he's risen!' Just like Mary, as far as they were concerned Jesus was dead. Think about that. Because John's writing this to try and persuade us to believe. But if that's the case, why paint himself and Peter in a less than flattering light? That to start with they didn't believe, they didn't understand. Why do that? Because it was true.

But if Mary found the tomb empty, what did Peter and John find? Verse 4-7, 'Both of them were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. And stooping to look in he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there, *and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself*.'

Now, we've been making our way through Mark's gospel on Sunday mornings, and almost every week there's something in the Bible text that tells you, this has got to be an eyewitness account. And nearly every time I end up cutting it from the sermon because of time. It may be the way Mark uses names - and if a name's common, like James, or Simon, he clarifies which James or Simon he's talking about. He tells you about boats that travel with Jesus' boat, boats that play no part in the story, he just remembers them being there. He repeats himself - like 'these guys removed a roof… and, would you believe it ,they actually took the roof off', which you just don't do if you're making it up as you write it down, but which you do all the time when you're recalling something that actually happened. And here, with John, you get another. It's this cloth that had been placed on Jesus' head, now sitting apart from all the other cloths. It's the kind of detail you'd remember if this morning was forever seared on your memory.

Look at the cloth sitting apart by itself. Look at Mary in search of a corpse. Look at Peter and John failing to understand. And let them answer your doubts.

You see, your doubts matter, because, as with Mary, who you're looking for matters. You see, if you think Jesus is dead and out there somewhere is the dust of his bones, it's going to affect the way you live. Or if you think that 2000 years ago, this man Jesus physically rose from the dead, that's going to profoundly change the way you live. Who you're looking for, what you think happened at that tomb, is going to change the moral decisions you make. It's going to change what you look for in a spouse, how you measure success in life, what you think your money is for, how you're going to raise your kids, and just about any other question you ever face.

Listen to what Paul wrote. It's from 1 Corinthians 15, where Paul unpacks the implications of Christ's resurrection. 'If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead' (1 Cor 15:19-20). Now, why does Paul say Christians are to be pitied if they're wrong about the resurrection of Christ? Because, if Christ has been raised, he's the Lord. So we're going to live like that. We're going to live the way he calls us

to live. We're going to serve and sacrifice and love our neighbour and use our money and spend and be spent for him and others. But if you're wrong about that, then you're wasting your time living like that. Rather, as Paul says, 'If the dead are not raised, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die."' (1 Cor 15:32).

And here's the thing, if deep down you have this gnawing doubt that Jesus *wasn't* raised, you won't have the confidence to live the way he calls you to live. You'll keep one foot in Christianity and one foot in the world. You'll want to be eating and drinking with the world, but all the time feeling guilty about it. As someone has said, you'll have too much sin to enjoy your religion and too much religion to enjoy your sin. But when you know Christ was raised from the dead, you know there's a world beyond this world, a life beyond this life, that judgment or reward lie ahead, and that puts everything into perspective. And so the resurrection of Christ becomes a motivating and clarifying power in your life - to live a life of service not self-centredness, of worship not self-absorption, of sacrifice not self-promotion. And our self-focused, and self-obsessed societies need those virtues more than ever.

So, look at Mary, look at Peter and John, look at that face cloth, let them answer your doubts and let that transform the way you live.

The Answer to your Tears

Look at v11, 'Mary stood weeping outside the tomb.' And first the angels, and then Jesus ask her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" It's obvious why, isn't it? She's weeping out of grief and loss and confusion. It's why any of us weep.

We can weep over the death of a loved one, or the death of a dream. We can weep over the grief of loneliness or when we feel confused and overwhelmed by circumstances. We can weep at our failure and sin, and the mess we've made of our lives. But for whatever reason you weep, where are you supposed to go to wipe away your tears?

I read a great quote this week from Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale*, a book I've not read (!), which says, "All men know that the true good is Happiness, and all men seek it, but for the most part by wrong routes - like a drunk man who knows he has a house but can't find his way home."

In other words, in our sadness we go down all the wrong roads in search of happiness, stumbling along, hoping to find something that numbs the pain, or turns grief to gladness. We know we have a home, we know there is such a thing as happiness, but like a drunk man, we can't find it. Or at least not a happiness that lasts. The Psalmist says, 'weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning.' (Ps 30:5). Except, with most of the things we try, night comes back again soon enough, and the return of darkness and weeping is just temporarily postponed.

So look again at Mary, because something turns her around. Something wipes away her tears. And she goes from weeping in front of a tomb, to standing in front of the disciples and v18, 'Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord."

So, what did happen to her to turn her grief around?

Verses 14-16: 'She turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" Supposing him to be

the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned and said to him in Aramaic, "Rabboni!".'

You see, if this life is all there is, and there is no resurrection of the dead, you can only find joy by pretending. By pretending that life, and all the great moments of life, actually have meaning, which they don't if secularism is correct; by trying your hardest not to think about the never ending darkness that's going to engulf you and all you love. Secularism can only offer you joy by getting you to ignore your end.

But if with Mary you know Christ is risen from the dead, you know death is not the end. And then, joy doesn't come by ignoring your end, it comes by contemplating it. It comes by realising that however bad things are now, God is working them for your good and one day he will right every wrong, and wipe away every tear. And joy comes, not by staggering down all the wrong roads like Chaucer's drunk man, but by realising Christ has secured for you a future beyond all your imaginings. The future all your searching for happiness has been pointing you to.

In CS Lewis' *The Last Battle*, when the characters finally get to enter Aslan's country, Lewis writes that 'it was the unicorn who summed up what everyone was feeling': "I have come home at last! This is my real country! I belong here. This is the land I have been looking for all my life, though I never knew it till now… Come further up and further in!" Because there is no limit to the joy God has in store for those he knows by name. Come further up and further in

You see, how must Jesus have said 'Mary' that made Mary lift her tear-stained eyes and realise, 'it's him!'? How tenderly did he say it?

But listen, he meets you in your sadness, and he calls you by your name with that same tenderness, so that you would lift your head and know he's risen from the dead and all shall be well.

And it's the fact that he is risen that can can lift the grief of our sin and failure. In Romans 4, Paul writes that righteousness 'will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered for our trespasses *and raised for our justification*.' (Rom 4:24-25). You see, we're weighed down by our sin when we think we still have to carry it. But at the cross Christ carried it for us, and he was delivered for our trespasses, for all those times we've trespassed down Chaucer's wrong roads. But as Jesus stands alive in front of Mary, he tells us all, that sacrifice has been accepted and you are forgiven: he was raised for our justification. Raised that we might be declared not guilty, because at the cross he stood in the place of the guilty.

You see, to live under a cloud of guilt is to live as if Christ has not been raised. But he has. It's to live as if all there is is night and never dawn. But look when Christ's resurrection happened. Verse 1: 'on the first day of the week… while it was still dark.' Because sin and sorrow are the dark before the dawn. But Christ is risen, morning's coming, a new week's starting. So see him alive and, for whatever reason you weep, let him wipe away your tears.

The Answer to Our Fears

Jesus greets Mary in the garden and says to her, v17, "Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father, but go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." Now why tell them that? Why not tell them, "I'm risen"?

Why "I am ascending to my Father and your Father"? Because Jesus knows what's dominating their thinking right now: v19, 'On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were *for fear of the Jews*…'

Fear can be paralysing and imprisoning, can't it? Think of those times when you knew what the right thing to do or say was, but you didn't do it. And how many times is it fear that sways our decision making? The fear of consequences, the fear of what others might think.

And so, if these disciples and you and I are not to live imprisoned by fear, we need to know that someone greater than anything that could happen to us is in control. And not just that he's in control, but that he's also good, so good he will only let that which is for our ultimate good happen to us.

So Jesus tells Mary, 'Go and tell them that. Go tell them they're my brothers, and I am ascending to my Father and their Father, to the place of ultimate power and authority, tell them they have nothing to fear.'

And then he comes behind their locked doors. He enters the prison of their fears. Verses 19-20, 'Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord.' And they go from hiding in fear, to the greatest missionary movement the world has seen. Because the resurrection of Christ from the dead, and his ascension to the place of power, is the answer to every fear.

It's the answer to our fear of others, because it tells us, he's in control, and he is for us, so in comparison, what can anyone else do to us? 'Well', you might say, 'they can kill us'. Sure. But Christ's resurrection it's also the answer to our fear of death, because as Paul says 'Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep' (1 Cor 15:20). Now, what do the first fruits of a harvest tell you? It tells you, the rest of the harvest is coming! And Christ's resurrection is just the first of many. One day you will be raised, and knowing that breaks the power of the fear of death.

But there's one more contemporary fear the resurrection of Jesus answers. It's the nagging fear of who you are, or who you're supposed to be. It's identity anxiety. You see, our current culture tells you, you've got to decide for yourself who you are. You've got to form your own identity. But that's a weight none of us can bear. Instead, look at Jesus telling Mary to 'go tell my brothers', and calling his Father their Father, and know that's who you are. You're a beloved child of God. Jesus is not ashamed to call you family. So see him alive, and find your identity in him.

The Answer to Pointlessness

Standing among the disciples, Jesus says, v21, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." And Jesus' resurrection gave their lives purpose. It gave them a message and a mission.

In comparison, all secularism can offer you is existential angst. What's the point of my life? Why am I here? What's the point of anything? To which secularism has no answer. But Christianity does. You see, 1 Cor 15, having spent 57 verses unpacking the implications of Christ's resurrection, in the

last verse Paul writes, ‘Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, *always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labour is not in vain*.’ (v58).

You see if secular atheism is correct, and there is no resurrection from the dead, if this life is all there is, and one day the universe will collapse, or blow up, or whatever, then everything you do will be forgotten, everything you do is pointless, because there’s no point to anything.

But when you know Christ is risen, when you see him talking with Mary, speaking with the disciples, and sending them out into the world, then you know that whatever he has given you to do - your labour in the Lord - is not in vain. That as he sent them, he sends you. Which fills your life with meaning. And it gives you a message: Christ is Risen! - which changes everything. And it sends you out on a mission - to live for his glory, and spend your life for the good of others.