

Love is stronger than death

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Easter 2021

Love is stronger than death – quite literally. Jesus rose from the dead! He is alive! In his love for us, he came to bring us abundant life – life filled with hope, joy, freedom, justice, healing, equality, dignity, peace – he came to bring these good gifts of God to everyone.

But some people wanted to monopolise power, wealth and control for themselves. So they did what they thought was needed to stop him – they eventually murdered Jesus. But in him, the combined might of established religious and national vested interest and trans-national power were stopped in their tracks. Their *final solution*, to silence his movement by murdering him, was helpless in the face of the love which this dear, humble, compassionate man embodied. Love was born again when Jesus rose from the dead. His love is quite literally stronger than death itself.

John's gospel tells us that Mary Magdalene found the empty tomb; and Peter and the beloved disciple were witnesses to this – right down to the grave-cloths discarded in the cave. Dumbfounded, the men return to their homes. But Magdalene stays, weeping, at the entrance to the cave. She looks in and sees two angels there who ask her why she's weeping. She answers that she fears the body of her beloved teacher *Rabbouni* has been removed by someone. A horrible fear.

But then she turns and the risen Jesus appears to her, first asking the same question as the angels – *Why are you weeping?* – and then another question. She's been staring into the cave – *For whom are you looking?* Magdalene first assumes he must be 'the gardener' and asks if he's the one who's taken her teacher away. She doesn't recognise him. But the *gardener?*

It's a lovely detail, and only in John's resurrection story, this memory of the tomb being in a garden (which we also heard in the Good Friday gospel). This woman and this man alone in the garden echo the first man and woman in the Garden of Eden; placed there to serve and protect. We know Jesus as the most perfect expression of our human vocation to serve and protect.

While we're on the subject of echoes of earlier stories, let's go back to Jesus' second question to Magdalene – *For whom are you looking?* It reminds us of God looking for the man and the woman hiding in the Garden of Eden. But it's the same question Jesus asked Judas and the soldiers in another garden – Gethsemane. John's drawing all sorts of threads together. We're reminded of betrayal and deceit in the two other gardens – Eden and Gethsemane. But as soon as John's evoked these memories, we see that in *this* garden, they're wiped away. *Mary*, he says; *Rabbouni* – my teacher. And she grabs him. Every tear is wiped away. Jesus has to ask her to let go of him – physically. Everything's different from now on, but still connected.

In this garden, the man doesn't point a finger of blame at the woman. Rather, Jesus commissions Mary to carry the wonderful news of his resurrection to the others. She is like the river flowing out of the Garden of Eden to water the whole Earth – she is the first Apostle, sent to bear the good news that the love of Jesus is stronger than death. That is the Gospel we bear still.

So in today's service, we began our worship in a garden. We lit a fire to show that our God is afire with love – love that is stronger than death. From that fire, we lit a candle which held the light of Christ before us as we recalled the true significance of his resurrection in all time and space. And in the next few minutes, we will remember our baptisms – where we went under the deep waters of death with Christ in order that we might be raised to new life with him.

We engage in these ancient, symbolic acts to remind ourselves *whose* we are. We, have been raised to new life from the deep waters of death by the power of Jesus. We are to live the certainty that love is stronger than death. We are set free to name and defy the powers of greed, control and fear and death which could not contain Jesus, and which have no legitimate place in the world. Those powers rise and seek to dominate in every age; they're doing so now. But we know, and we proclaim what we celebrate again today. Love is stronger than death. Christ is risen; Alleluia!