

AT EARLY DAWN

Romans 6. 3-11

Luke 24. 1-12

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Easter matters to every one of us, and especially to everyone who makes the great decision to trust what is written about our Lord in the gospel passage we have just heard. If we believe that Jesus rose from the dead, we are not just believing an odd fact from two thousand years ago; we are trusting that there is a kind of life, and kind of love and trust and joy that is the very essence of Christ's identity, which is now coming to life in us. And as it comes to life, we begin to see that no amount of pressure, stress or suffering in our lives has power in itself to break the bond that has been created between us and our Lord's life and activity. Not only is Jesus alive; *we are alive*; and we are alive with a fuller and deeper life than just our own. The resources available to us now are more than we could ever have imagined.

Christ rises from the dead not only to find his home in heaven, but also to make his home in us. He rises so that *we may rise* out of the prisons of guilt, anxiety, self-obsession and apathy that so constantly surround us. But in order for this to happen (says St Paul in our epistle reading) we have to go on, day after day, getting used to parts of us dying, just as our Lord died; we have to get used to seeing our self-serving and self-protecting habits brought into the light that shines from Jesus' face. This is why St Paul says that Christians go around with both death and life at work in their lives: we always strive to let the light of Christ shine on, and *kill off* our sinful behaviour and habits; and we do everything we can to let that new life that is ours in our Lord shine through.

Think for a moment about the art of the Eastern Church, and in particular the great icons of Greece and Russia. In these icons, we see a sort of visual commentary on St Paul's words. The icons depict human figures that are seen against the background of divine light; and the light does not take away their human features, but rather makes them transparent. These icons are a visual expression, if you like, of what Paul has to say about the Easter news of new life. Ordinary humanity, ordinary physical reality, your bodily life and mine are being transformed from within by the presence of God's glory.

It was early dawn, St Luke tells us, when the women came to Jesus' tomb. They ran to tell the others that the tomb was empty; and the apostles did not believe them. It is only when Peter goes to the tomb and sees the linen cloths by themselves, that he is amazed. The light is dawning in Peter's mind. It is no longer dark. Whenever and wherever Christ is around, the view becomes clear; darkness is put to flight. This is why our worship at Easter traditionally begins with the lighting of a fire and the blessing of a candle.

Our Lord *lights up* the landscape; and what we are told by St Luke actually lights up the landscape of the rest of the Scriptures. Peter and the other disciples will now be able to read their own scriptures differently. They will now come to see that the events of Good Friday actually make sense: they are (and always have been) part of the pattern of God's work with his people. God is always faithful to his people, even when all they have to give him in rejection and contempt. And no human rejection can destroy God's promise and God's longing to be with those whom he loves. This is what Peter, Mary Magdalene, to Mary the mother of James and the others began to realise on that first Easter morning. Not even the torturing death of Jesus can change God's love; and so when the women and Peter come looking for a body, they find an empty grave. That empty grave is like an open door, a door opened to God's future.

But of course it is the whole landscape of our life and our reality that is enlightened by Christ. In this light we see who God really is, and how deep his faithfulness is to us. We see who we are; how constantly we fail; but also how passionately we are loved and valued. We see each other, as people valued by God, and our attitudes are drastically changed. We see that the material world itself is full of God's glory, and that it demands our reverence and care.

So with Peter, we look at early dawn into the empty tomb, as if through an open door. On the other side is a world drenched with light. God's beauty is shining through. Yet it's our own world we are seeing, seeing it as God made it to be, and seeing ourselves as God made us to be.

It is early dawn, and you and I are walking into daylight.

Amen.