

John 20.1 - 18

Alleluia, Christ is risen.

Would you eat horse meat? Yay or nay?

I suspect the majority of you would say no.

Even if I said it's actually good for you I suspect many of you would struggle to believe it.

Another question then: would you believe that a caterpillar has more muscles than a human?

Would you believe that a normal head of hair can support a 12 tonne weight?

All of them true: and yet perhaps all in their own way are hard to believe.

All right: the biggie do you believe that 2000 years ago the Son of God rose from the dead?

For a world that demands proof,

Evidence,

This is the hardest truth of all.

For some it is just too big a step,

Too outside of peoples' experience,

That for some it is impossible to believe.

People throughout history have tried to re tell the story,

To help make sense of it.

And none more so than C S Lewis in the Narnia Chronicles.

Where the character of Aslan – the great lion

points us towards Christ,

And helps us understand what the story is all about.

In the Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, four children, Peter, Susan, Edmund and Lucy are brought into Narnia and go into battle with its cruel ruler, the White Witch.

Aslan has made a deal with the white witch, that he should be sacrificed in place of Edmund.

In the film version the moments after Aslan's death are interspersed with images from the battle:

Where the forces of the white witch are confronted by the free peoples' of Narnia.

The battle goes poorly for the Narnians:

They have learned that Aslan has died.

They are on their own.

With numbers mounting.

In a last ditch attempt, Peter challenges the White Witch to a duel.

A duel he cannot win.

And then, in that moment of absolute darkness,

When all hope is lost,

When belief in the cause is shattered,

A tremendous roar is heard in the distance.

And in utter disbelief the combatants turn and see a gloriously Resurrected Aslan,

Standing triumphant.

And the White Witch utters a single word: impossible.

The Narnians disbelief quickly turns to belief as good triumphs,

And victory is won.

It is a beautiful portrayed moment showing the movement from disbelief to belief.

From hopelessness to hope.

That's a sense we see clearly in today's Gospel.

For Jesus' followers, the world on that first Easter morning is one without hope.

Their belief and the faith they put in him has been shattered,

In verse 1, it is significant that Mary goes to the tomb "while it was still dark".

As well as the literal darkness of early morning,

This is also spiritual darkness,

The darkness of a world gripped with fear and hopelessness.

It is a darkness we may find ourselves in,

When gripped by illness.

When a loved one dies.

In that darkness, belief can seem absent.

And yet we are told that the beloved disciple does something extraordinary:

He believes.

All he sees is an empty tomb.

Nothing more.

He doesn't see the risen Jesus,

He doesn't yet understand the scriptural promise,

And yet he believes.

Even though he doesn't even yet know exactly what it is he believes in, he nevertheless believes.

For me there is here great strength.

In a world that demands belief based on proof,

There is something immensely re-assuring in the disciple's belief in the sight of the empty tomb.

It reminds us that we don't need hard, physical proof,

All that is required is a small instance of belief,

From which faith may grow.

But the real question we need to ask today of all days is: **what difference does belief make?**

If I said to you that horse meat has half the fat of beef,

And far more omega 3

Then I bet at last some of you might reconsider eating it.

It would make a difference.

The belief in the risen Aslan gave the narnians fresh motivation,

Inspiration to win the battle.

So what does it mean for us to believe in the Resurrected Christ?

Well, I want to highlight two things that John has subtly weaved into the text.

Firstly, fittingly, let's look at Mary Magdalene.

Mary begins without belief,

Without hope.

And at first she doesn't recognise Jesus.

I wonder why:

The theologian Jurgen Moltmann says that there is something profoundly new about the Resurrection.

As I have preached in the past, Jesus is not the same: there is a newness, a freshness, a new beginning.

Maybe that's why she doesn't recognise him until he calls her name,

And from that there is a transformation:

She believes in the Resurrected Christ.

In the new life that is found in Him.

And that belief leads her to being tasked to spread the news.

To go and tell his disciples that "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, my God and your God."

Our belief is the same: we are tasked with spreading the news.

But what is that news?

What does the Resurrection mean?

Well it is here that the second piece of John's puzzle comes in:

When Mary goes into the tomb she sees two angels

One at the head,

And one at the foot of where the body had been.

Some scholars have suggested that this an image that recalls the Ark of the Covenant in Exodus,

On the Ark stood two gold angels

And between them was an empty space called the mercy seat,

It was the Holiest of places: the place where God resided.

Leviticus 16 tells us that it was part of the annual Day of Atonement: where special rituals were believe to appease God and send away the sins of the people.

And what do we see here:

Two angels: one at the head,

One of the feet.

I suggest that John is confirming the imagery he has had throughout his Gospel: that God's presence is now to be found in Jesus himself.

But of course, the slab is empty.

In this tomb,

This place of death, God is absent from the mercy seat.

Indeed, Jesus has risen:

Death has indeed lost its sting.

In his crucifixion Jesus has once and for all conquered sin.

And defeated death.

The darkness has been overcome

In the film adaptation of Lion Witch and Wardrobe, it is fitting that the Resurrected Aslan appears with the sun shining radiantly behind him.

And yet there is confusion.

We only need turn on the news to know there is still suffering in the world.

And as people we are living in the inbetween time: in the knowledge that Christ has been Resurrected but the world has not yet been put right.

But we know that it will be:

And here is our hope: that in the Resurrection of Christ we see the God who has been through that pain himself,

Who has defeated it from within,

And who now walks amongst us

Beside us.

The God who will never leave us.

So when we get sick,

Or when we look and realise a loved one,

Or a trusted friend is suddenly no longer there,

We find hope in the one who Himself has been through pain and death

The One who is Resurrected.

And from that belief we are transformed,

We live out our lives in the knowledge of that future,

And – like Mary – we find ourselves wanting to share that future with anyone who will listen.

That is the difference belief makes to Mary.

That is the difference belief makes to us.

She,

We

Continue the story.

Spreading the news that the great Lion has risen,

That Death has indeed lost its sting.

Amidst the times of darkness we will undoubtedly feel,

In those times of doubt,

Fear

Anger

And shock

In the Resurrection we have the assurance that our belief in Jesus means we cannot be separated from the love of God.

Jesus the Son has risen from the dead.

Here lies our strength and our certainty.

Here lies our future,

Here lies our salvation.

And so we believe and hope and look forward with one voice we proclaim: "Alleluia, Christ is risen."

James Pacey