



Easter Sunday
27 March 2016

Touch and Go

A sermon by Revd Dr Sam Wells

Readings: Acts 10.34-43; 1 Corinthians 15.12-22; John 20.11-18

A few days ago I got a call from a friend. As soon as I heard her voice I knew things weren't right. 'Where are you?' I said. 'Just round the corner from St Martin's,' she said. 'Let's do this face-to-face,' I said, and five minutes later she was sitting in front of me. 'It feels like it's all fallen apart,' she said. 'All the work I've done over the last few years, everything I've hoped and planned for. It's just gone south.' And she stared at the floor. She stared at the floor for a long time. We both did. Not because the floor had a lot of answers, but probably because if she'd have looked anywhere else she'd have started to cry and she didn't want to do that – probably because if she started she didn't know when she'd stop.

After we said goodbye I picked up John chapter 20 and I realised who she was and what she'd been looking at, in that long, disbelieving, crushed and demoralised gaze at the floor. She was Mary Magdalene, and she'd been looking deep into the darkness of the empty tomb. Mary's staring into the tomb because the tomb is the closest she can get to Jesus; the Jesus who'd called her, restored her, given her life meaning and purpose, taken her seriously, offered her a future and a hope – the Jesus who'd more or less created her. And he was gone – not just gone, but destroyed; not just destroyed, but humiliated, expunged and obliterated. And everything he stood for – forgiveness, justice, freedom, everlasting life, empowerment, glory, truth – it was all vaporised with him. And, to add insult to injury, now his dead body was gone too.

This moment is even worse than Good Friday. Good Friday has sacrifice, nobility, dedication, a macabre beauty. But this moment, as Mary gazes into the heart of darkness, there's nothing to see but waste, indignity, horror, loss, cruelty, disgrace, despair. It's not that there isn't wonder and life – this is after all a garden, morning has broken, the world's waking up, there's creativity and action and energy all around. But Mary's looking deep into where it all ends, the tomb of death that makes a mockery of the ephemeral parade of life, a plughole that drags all creation down into a vortex of spiralling desolation. This is the paradox of life, right here: the wonder of fertile, vibrant creation, and the everlasting darkness of doomed death. Which one is ultimately the truth? Mary at this moment thinks she's just found out. And she's weeping uncontrollable tears.

But listen. This instant of total dejection is when she hears one single word. Her own name. 'Mary.' When Christians use the phrase 'the word of God,' sometimes they mean the Bible, sometimes they refer to the preached or proclaimed word of the gospel, sometimes they're talking about Jesus the logic of God made flesh. But this moment encapsulates every meaning of 'the word.' Mary's looking deep and far into the horror of a world without God; and then she hears the word – one single word, which changes everything. One single word turns death to life, despair to hope, darkness to light. Mary. 'I am the good shepherd,' he'd said, 'and I call my sheep by name.' Mary.

Mary doesn't figure any of this out for herself. For a while she's so overwhelmed and preoccupied with the black hole of despond that she can't make out any other reality. But then she does the simplest, humblest, most straightforward, yet most crucial and transformative thing of her whole life: she turns round. And in that turning we see the whole gospel. Jesus calls us by name. Jesus is Adam, the first man, meeting Eve in the garden, and saying 'Could we start again please?' Jesus is Abraham the embodiment of Israel, meeting Sarah, and saying, 'Could we go on a new journey and become a true blessing to the whole world?' Jesus is Moses, the liberator, meeting Miriam, and

saying, 'Could we begin our long walk to freedom?' Mary turns from horror to elation, from depression to joy, from abyss to glory. A moment ago death engulfed everything. Now Mary's inhabiting a story of beginnings, blessings, and belongings. It takes one word. The word of God.

And what does Mary do? She reaches out to embrace the risen Jesus. Of course she does. She celebrates, she rejoices, she shares the wonder. Think about every embrace you've ever known: the cuddle of a child, the reassurance of a friend, the greeting of a companion, the ecstasy of a lover, the consolation of a sympathiser, the strength of a rescuer. This is the definitive embrace of all time: Mary meets her maker, her redeemer, her empowerer. If you want to know what heaven feels like, this is it: sorrow turns to dancing, words turn to song, death turns to life. Every time we hug someone, we're reminding them of this most important hug of all. This is the touch of life, hope in the face of death, solidarity in the midst of bewilderment, reunion after trauma, tenderness overcoming isolation.

But an embrace isn't all that Jesus has in store for Mary, or in store for us. Here are the hardest words in the Easter story: 'Don't keep hold of me.' I wonder if you've ever hugged someone and never wanted to let go. You want to keep that moment forever, treasure that touch and inscribe it on your heart, retain that love and be fed by it every moment. But ponder that feeling for a moment. However wonderful it is, doesn't the desire to preserve that embrace ultimately reduce the other person to an instrument of your own needs? Isn't there more to their life than making you feel cherished and beloved? Jesus says to Mary, 'I love you totally and have been raised to restore you to life and be with you forever; but I am also here for everyone else – I'm not just your toy – and most of all I'm here to restore the dance of the Holy Trinity that's the essence of all things. Don't confuse the beginning of the gospel with the whole of salvation; don't reduce love to the intensity of the moment; don't restrict the glory to just you and me.'

Quickly Mary discovers what it is that's so wonderful it's worth interrupting an embrace with the risen Jesus. Again, it's all in one word: 'Go.' Just as the whole of the gospel is contained in that single word, 'Mary,' so the whole of ministry and mission is encapsulated in that single word, 'Go.' Mary was powerless, pitiful, and dejected, and now she's purposeful, focused, and energised. Her task is to tell – she has news, she's seen the glory, she has truth to share. And she's going to the people Jesus calls 'my brothers' – in other words those who betrayed him not two days ago: the fact he calls them 'brothers' means this is news of forgiveness as well as resurrection. The news is that Jesus is ascending, in other words that her Lord is the Lord of heaven and earth, that the intensity and passion and devotion of her relationship with Jesus is replicated in God's passion and devotion toward her. The resurrection, the forgiveness and the everlasting life God has given to Jesus, God is longing to give to her and to her brothers, those who've betrayed and denied and forsaken and fled.

So here are the three Easter words. Turn – from despair to joy. Touch – but know when to let go. And Go – because there's new life to live, news to share, restoration to embody. Turn. Touch. Go.

I wonder if you know what it feels like to stare at the floor like my friend last week. I wonder if that's how you were feeling when you walked in this church half an hour ago. I wonder which of those three Easter words you find the hardest. To turn – to realise that despair and despondency aren't the last word, that by being absorbed by them you're missing the gentle presence behind you. To touch – to see your longing to be held, loved, embraced, met, is only part of your deeper calling to share the joy of God with all God's children. To go – to find life in good work, bring reconciliation and healing and truth and discovery to those who're beset by grief and regret and bitterness and hurt.

Turn. Touch. Go. The three Easter words. And they start with a woman looking deep into the heart of darkness, believing all is lost, and meaningless, and ruined, and rotten. Jesus is back. Death can't hold him. He's come back for you. He's come back to embrace you. He's come back to give you good work to do, with him, forever. Turn and greet him. He's calling your name.