



**Sermon preached by Revd Andrew Hurst on 21st April 2024**

**Readings: John 10:11-18; Act 4:5-12; 1 John 3:16-24; Psalm 23**

**Easter IV**

Outside the entrance to St Dunstan's Chapel in Ely Cathedral there is a striking sculpture of Mary Magdalene encountering the risen Christ by the artist David Wynne. Perhaps you know it; I am sure that some of you do.

I love it. These life sized figures stripped bare to the thinnest of figures - the Christ figure so gaunt, his ribs showing, so sparse - reflecting the trauma and insult in body and soul of his Passion, arms aloft as if startled to see Mary Magdalene; she in turn is skinny thin and has her right hand up to her forehead as if shielding her eyes. It seems to me that they have both startled each other. The sculpture conveys the shock of the resurrection.

In the Easter narrative, like so many narratives with which we are so familiar, it is hard to take ourselves back to the enormity - indeed the shock - of what has happened. In a handful of days and under a week the triumphal entry into Jerusalem on what we now call Palm Sunday has been converted and perverted by the cynical manipulation of the crowd and an act of betrayal. Jesus of Nazareth has been arrested, tried in a sham trial (always the first resort of the corrupt), mocked, physically beaten up, and then murdered in an extra-judicial killing of the most contrived, sadistic manner. Despair and fear has fallen upon his followers, one his most loyal has denied him three times, and now they are in fear for their lives: dreams smashed down, hopes dashed, humiliation at hand, and nothing left but the memories of an exhilarating roller-coaster ride of emotion, love, hardship, hunger, storms, a wedding party, healing and hope - and now it is all over. If they are lucky they might manage to slip back to Galilee unnoticed and maybe beg their boats and nets back - and it will all be as if none of this had ever been.

So - yes - startled to say the least, could be the first emotion that comes on that early Easter dawn.

Our readings today, and our sung Psalm, have very much in mind the metaphor that Jesus uses in John's Gospel of being the Good Shepherd. I expect that if we had to quickly write down our top ten Bible quotes we most of us would have the Good Shepherd down on our lists near the top.

John says that Jesus says, "I am the good Shepherd. The good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep ... I know my own and they know me." The image is a powerful one - even if we doubt very much today that any modern day farm worker is literally going to lay down his life for the flock.

But Jesus as the Good Shepherd is a powerful image. It is also a comforting image. It rather sums up for us that picture of being led to still water, of not wanting, of green pastures. It rather conjures up the pastoral scene - of the sheep contentedly grazing under azure skies. There is a sort of cosy and comfortable sense to it. A - pardon the pun - rather warm and woolly way of being a Christian: everything is lovely, everything is safe, everything is calm and quiet and undisturbed under the benign protection of the Good Shepherd.

My father in law was a farmer in Devon. He had a mixed dairy, beef and sheep farm. He died about ten years ago, having retired a few years before. When we would be down staying, many a Spring or Summer Saturday or Sunday morning would be spent with the sheep. Far from having some cushy number where they just loafed about all summer not doing very much apart from occasionally bleating obligingly for the holiday makers, they were a surprisingly busy lot.

The first thing to note is that it is indeed the case that the Shepherd knows the sheep and they know him. Looking after sheep involves a lot of hands on work. Every few weeks the sheep were moved between fields. It is important that they are moved around to fresh pasture - otherwise a field can become what my father in law described as "sheep sick". When we moved them, always a bit of a stressful situation and - I can assure you - nothing like *One Man And His Dog* on BBC 2 on Sunday Evenings - Michael went out front. He called them and they, knowing him, followed him. This great moving jostling noisy woolly carpet went down the lanes and into another field.

I have already spoken of doing their feet - that unceremonious upending of a furious ewe, plonked into a very undignified position to have its feet trimmed. And imagine how they feel about being sheared ....

So the thing is, for the flock, living and grazing away on the lush green Devonshire grass actually involved regular moments of being very dramatically disturbed - you could say startled. Sheep are easily startled (apart from on the Hebridean Island where we go regularly - on the single track roads they are unfazed at a car heading straight for them, and can take a leisurely age to bother to move out of your way).

But on the whole, they are startled.

And so it seems to me the image of Christ as the good Shepherd is particularly apt, because living in faith and seeking to follow our lives in faith, often to fall short, can lead to us being startled - that is being challenged, taken by surprise, not expecting the unexpected. Just as Mary Magdalene is startled in the David Wynne sculpture, we too can find that our faith in fact challenges us much more than we might have thought.

If non-Christians look on and think that all we are doing is contentedly, perhaps complacently grazing because we have got all the answers and nothing is going to trouble us any more, then they are wrong. Living in faith and being open to God is to open ourselves up to challenge, and quite startling challenges at that.

This Church, Downing Place is a tremendously impressive example of just that. As a child we as a family were one of many Emmanuel URC families. My life growing up, right up to Sixth Form, was Emmanuel. I have very early memories, as does my middle brother, who once asked as a small boy whether God would be in the Skelter - by which he had mistaken the Minister (Rev'd David Geddes I think) up high in the pulpit that looked like a Helter Skelter because of its winding staircase for the divine manifestation of the reason why we were there every Sunday. It is an interesting theological question to answer whether God will be in the Skelter - but I expect my mum answered it on a more prosaic level.

Since those days - formative years that stay with me now aged 59 - this Church has grown from two Churches each facing their own challenges. One building sold, another beautifully adapted to this magnificent City centre Church today, thriving, surviving the Pandemic, living on with a confident future.

And for each of us we journey on too. Had someone suggested to me that one day I would be "in the skelter" in this latest iteration of my childhood and family Church - I would have been very startled indeed.

Yet somewhere in each of us the Holy Spirit is at work. Stirring us up, calming us down, nudging, cajoling, taking us by surprise. Our faith requires of us and the Holy Spirit works on us to live as John's epistle urges us to do: loving not in word or speech but in truth and action. This Church is love in truth and action. John calls upon us to be bold - boldness before God - bold in our belief, our love, living in Christ so that Christ lives in us.

Peter - transformed Peter from the frightened man who denied his Lord three times when the crunch came - Peter with John tells the High Priests with courage despite now finally being under arrest, a prisoner in custody himself (which is what he feared that dreadful early Good Friday morning by his denials) - Peter can look them in the eye, remind them of their utter rejection of Jesus when he was with them in body and proclaim him Jesus **Christ** of Nazareth.

So amazing things happen when we are open to the Holy Spirit moving within us and around us in our lives. We may not always know it - it may be that only some time later, looking as it were in the rearview mirror, it dawns on us that a situation or a predicament was relieved or resolved or reconciled by something we thought, said or did - or suddenly decided not to do - or that a kind word from a random stranger, or a being brought up short for reasons we can't quite put our finger on made all the difference.

Each Sunday - always new - we come, we open the door on our faith, sometimes wearily, sometimes begrudgingly, sometimes inconveniently, but we do - and over the hours, the days and the years we affirm ourselves in our individual lives of faith.

None of us have all the answers, but we can all be open, as members of the flock, quite properly every once in a while, to being startled.

And we can be re-assured that however much we might be startled in our faith as dear old Mary Magdalen in the sculpture at Ely - we are never made afraid.

*Amen*

Andrew Hurst

Assistant Priest, St Mark's, Newnham and St Andrew and St Mary, Grantchester