

John 20:1-18

Seeing only the gardener or the risen Lord?

I find this passage from John's gospel one of the most emotionally charged in the whole of the New Testament. Mary has gone to the tomb early and alone. Perhaps she wanted some time alone to grieve; to be with Jesus even though she knew he was dead. She must have been devastated in a way that is difficult for us to comprehend, when she discovered even that small comfort was denied her. When Peter and the other disciple had been to the tomb and gone away again, Mary remained. Her grief was so great that when her eyes saw Jesus standing in the garden, her mind could only see a gardener. Only when he spoke her name was she able to recognise him.

Few of us – particularly those born after the end of the second world war – will have ever experienced circumstances like those we are currently living through. Some people have been unable to be with loved ones at the end of their lives or to have the support of family around them as they grieve. Mary's devastation will be all too easily understood.

The Coronavirus pandemic has affected the life of just about every person on the planet to a greater or lesser extent. In the face of such an overwhelming event, it can be difficult to see where God is in the situation. Jesus is in the garden but we can only see a gardener.

Through that first Easter, the disciples and Mary would have felt that everything was turned upside down and things would never be the same again. They were right, though not in the way they expected. The turning point for Mary is when Jesus speaks her name and she realises that he is there with her; in that garden, in her life today and in her future. I imagine the way that he speaks her name being with gentleness and compassion, full of understanding for her and her grief. But his words to her go beyond that moment of tenderness. Jesus encourages her to go and tell the others that he is risen and is about to ascend to his Father. The commission to take good news to those who need to hear it began there and then.

Jesus never promised us a smooth ride or a free ticket to bypass life's dark and painful times but he did promise to be with us every step of the way (Matthew 28:20). There is nowhere life can ever take us that Jesus has not already been and he is with us in every situation, even when we can only see the gardener!

Today we celebrate the greatest moment in the history of creation:

*And the morning that You rose
All of Heaven held its breath
'Til that stone was moved for good
For the Lamb had conquered death.¹*

The risen Christ changes everything. Even death is conquered. You will probably be reading this at home, observing the lockdown, but wherever you are this Easter Sunday I hope that you can take a moment to hear Jesus speak your name as he did Mary's. What is it that he says to you today?

¹ From 'King of Kings' by Jason Ingram, Brooke Ligertwood & Scott Ligertwood. © Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC, Capitol Christian Music Group