**Alive for Evermore** **Easter Sunday (John 20:1-18)**

Picture with me that moment by the tomb.

Mary arrives first. In some gospel accounts she is with the other women, and they are carrying ointment to bathe Jesus’ body.

She sees that the stone in front of the tomb has been rolled away.

I imagine that her first response is fear and shock.

She is so afraid and confused, that she runs to find the others. She probably blurts out to them: “What have they done? What’s happened? Who opened the tomb?”

Simon Peter and John immediately head off to the tomb at a running pace. The don’t walk slowly and calmly – no – they RUN!

John runs so fast that he arrives first – but he is too afraid to go into the empty tomb – he just peers in at the cloths lying there. It’s only when Simon Peter arrives after him, that they go into the empty tomb.

Then what?

We’re told that *‘they saw and believed’* (V8) … but believed what?

Did they believe that Jesus’ body had been taken? Grave robbery was very common then, and they most certainly had no reason to trust the authorities.

Believe what?

John’s account does not tell us what they believed. But we don’t exactly see them jumping for joy and shouting: “He’s alive! He’s alive!”.

No – we’re told that they simply:

 “*returned to the place where they had been staying”* (v10)

What? Really?

I imagine that they are probably shaking their heads in disbelief, and maybe a little bit afraid themselves.

In Luke’s account of the story, we’re told that when the woman came to the disciples, and they told them that Jesus had risen from the dead, the disciples simply dismissed it *“as nonsense, and they didn’t believe the women.”* (Luke 24:11) They describe it as ‘an idle tale’ in some translations.

And in Luke’s account, when Peter goes to the tomb and sees it empty, “*he returned home, wondering what had happened.”* (Luke 24.12)

No – it seems pretty clear that the disciples did not immediately believe that Jesus had risen from the dead.

They just couldn’t understand it!

Even though they had been so close with Jesus in the last years.

Even though they had heard Jesus tell them again and again that he would rise from the dead.

Even though they knew the prophecies of the Hebrew scriptures.

Even though they were people who believed in miracles.

Even though they had witnessed miraculous healings, including Jesus bringing Lazarus back to life

Still – still they found it difficult to accept and to understand that Jesus was alive.

It was only when they experienced Jesus for themselves that they believed, and they rejoiced.

It’s the same for Mary in our reading today.

We see her crying in grief beside the empty tomb.

She is so quick to think the worse. She believes that someone has taken Jesus’ body.

Even though angels appear to her.

Even though Jesus himself appears to her.

Still – still she thinks he is just the gardener, and is unwilling to believe until she hears him call her by name: *“Jesus said to her – ‘Mary’”* (v.16)

As soon as she hears Jesus say her name – in that moment, Mary experiences Jesus.

She experiences, she is filled with joy, and she believes!

The Gospels go on to tell of moments that the risen Christ appeared to different groups of disciples:

* sometimes teaching,
* sometimes sharing food,
* sometimes allowing himself to be touched,

And each time those around him had the opportunity to experience the joy that Jesus was really there with them.

In the end, the disciples believed what they experienced, and they went on to share those experiences, along with Jesus’ teachings, to anyone who would listen to them.

Most of us will not have the chance that the disciples did.

But that does not mean that we can not experience Jesus today.

When we face times of grief in our lives, we can experience Jesus comforting us.

When we are lonely or anxious, we can experience Jesus walking beside us and listening to us in prayer.

When we feed the hungry, … when we help a friend in need, … when we speak up for the oppressed, … when we live out Christ’s mission – we can experience the Living Christ and God’s love in action.

And when we come to the table, we can experience the deep love of Jesus again and again.

A love that can change the world in miraculous ways.

A love that we are invited to be an active, living part of.

So today, come, even if like the disciples you don’t fully understand, come – and let us experience Jesus.

Be filled with the joy of knowing that Jesus is alive in you and in me. And let us share our experience of knowing Jesus with others.

As people of deep spirituality, of bold discipleship, of daring justice, let’s live into the incredible call to life that overcomes death.

Christ *is* risen. Christ is risen, indeed. Amen.

As we think about how we experience Jesus, let us confirm our faith, as together we say these words from the United Church Song of Faith: