

A Dawn Experience

Easter 2024

Our previous Bishop, Christopher Herbert, loved and studied Christian paintings -especially those big Italian Renaissance jobs – and gave talks about them, including here. And a question he posed was – Why are there so many paintings of the crucifixion and so few of the resurrection? One of the reasons may be that the Gospels give many graphic details of the crucifixion and the events leading up to it while there is no account of the actual resurrection – the Gospels only tell what happened after the resurrection.

And so, while there were many eyewitnesses of Jesus' death, there were none of his resurrection – only witnesses of the already risen Christ. The women came to the tomb while it was yet dark. The resurrection was before dawn, at night when you cannot see and when images are not helpful. For Jesus' disciples, realising the fact of the resurrection was a dawn experience. There may be some places where, as the song says “the dawn comes up like thunder”, but mostly it creeps up.

First of all, before any light that we can see, the birds start singing to herald the new day. We hear but we do not see. In the dawn experience of the resurrection you could say the birdsong was the words of the prophets and the words of Jesus himself. The disciples heard the words, but they did not see the point.

Then after the birds, the first light. It is not night but there is still mist, half-light. Shapes form and dissolve; we may even see ghostly figures and because the light is dim, mistakes can be made. Mary Magdalene in the garden did not recognise Jesus and took him to be the gardener; the two disciples on the road to Emmaus saw the man walking with them but did not recognise him as Jesus until they shared a meal in the evening.

After first light, the sun rises and there is full light, but it is still chilly. In Mark's account, when the women were told by the angel that Jesus had risen, they were so afraid that they did not tell the others; and when they

did, the others did not believe them. Luke says the other disciples dismissed the women's story as idle chatter.

And only sometime after full light does the sun rise high enough to give warmth and in the same way only after some time could Thomas cast aside his doubts and greet Jesus as "My Lord and my God" speaking the full glory of the resurrection. And I like to think that the sun was shining warmly on Lake Galilee as Jesus and his disciples shared a meal on the beach.

After that the disciples saw the reconfirmation of God's endorsement of Jesus at the Ascension; and at Pentecost was finally released all the energy from the risen sun of the son of God.

We have seen so many Easters that we ought not be stumbling about in the dark or mistaking illusion for reality but maybe it takes a dawn experience as well as many Easters for us fully to grasp the wonder of the event, to see it clearly, to feel its warmth and fully to incorporate it into our lives.