

Easter Day (2024)

Writer P.G. Wodehouse, actresses Betty Davis and Tallulah Bankhead, First Lady of the World Eleanor Roosevelt . . . *and my mother.*

A diverse group to be sure! But, in fact, they all have something in common.

All five were devoted fans of *The Edge of Night*, a daytime soap opera that ran from 1956 to 1984.

Unlike many soap operas at the time, this one focused more on crime than romance. It was the midday version of Perry Mason.

More than that, this detective crime drama was famous for its ‘cliffhangers’. Friday came and often as not fans were left in suspense waiting for Monday.

You may have noticed that today's Gospel ends in somewhat the same manner, with a cliffhanger.

Mary Magdalene and later Peter and John go to the tomb where Jesus' body had been laid on Friday and find it empty.

More intriguing still is the condition of the grave clothes that have been left behind.

Instead of the shroud being unwound so that the body could be removed, it remains wound, as if the body had simply evaporated out of it.

More than that, the napkin or piece of cloth that had been wrapped around the face is neatly folded up and has been set over to the side.

What could all this mean? We are left wondering. As the reading closes, still no Jesus, dead or otherwise!

The cliffhangers of *The Edge of Night* pale in comparison!

But we are left with a hint. That hint comes at the end when John takes a closer look at the grave clothes and believes. But what?

Apparently, he recalls Jesus' words about rising again.

At the time Jesus spoke them, they were incomprehensible. None of the disciples knew what to make of them.

True, the Jews of Jesus' day – at least some of them – professed belief in resurrection. At some time in future, the martyrs or perhaps all God's people were going to be raised and thus vindicated.

But there was nothing in Jewish expectation to suggest that one would be raised in advance of the rest.

But this is what looked like had happened as John examined the graveclothes. As he did, he had one of those aha moments. A light came on.

Later on, Jesus would show that what had happened was predicted in scripture. But that was later.

So, John's 'seeing' was more than observing objects lying on a slab of stone. It involved understanding and believing, even if that belief was quite preliminary.

You can just imagine the wonder and excitement he felt as this flash of understanding came.

Hopefully, as we revisit this story this morning, we can feel the tingle John felt as he looked at those graveclothes. They are key pieces of evidence. They speak of a sea-surge change in the course of history.

For as long as anyone could remember people had been filing in the door of death with no one coming out. Then One does comes out, not just as a one-of miracle, but as a sign that many more resurrections are to follow.

Satan's prison house has been stormed. The gate opened. Those long held as captives can go free.

“For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive,” Paul would go on to write in 1 Corinthians 15:22.

That is the message of Easter. It gives hope and meaning to life, as the story I am about to tell you shows.

About 1,300 years ago some Christian missionaries went to a dangerous little island to tell the people the story of Jesus, in particular of the resurrection.

The name of this island was Britain. Up in the northern part, in an area known then as Northumbria, there was a heathen king named Edwin.

He was greatly moved by the missionaries' words. He had become dissatisfied with the old heathen gods and was hungry for something more real. The message the missionaries brought had the ring of authenticity. Edwin felt drawn to it, but he wanted to be sure.

So, he called together his counsellors and began asking them for their thoughts. A priest by the name of Coife stepped forward. He said that Woden, Thor and the other Saxon gods had never done much for him and that he too was drawn to this new faith.

After he had finished, another man began to speak:

“O King, often when men are sitting at meat in your hall in wintertime and the warm fire is lighted on the the hearth and the cold rain-storm is raging without, a sparrow will fly in at one door and warm himself for a few moments in the light and heat of the fire, and then go out again by the other door into the winter’s darkness.

“So it is with the life of man in this world; what has gone before it, what will come after it, no one can tell. If therefore this new teaching can tell us something more certain, then it seems to me indeed worthy to be followed.”

Upon hearing this, Coifi, was persuaded. He jumped on his steed and rode straight to the Temple of Woden and ordered it to be burned. Later, King Edwin built on that very spot a little wooden church where today stands the great York Minster.

On Easter Eve 627, the king and a great number of his people were baptized.

A question mark had been turned into an exclamation point. Death's dark mystery flooded with light.

A wonderful story, but back to this morning passage.

We are indeed left at the end with a cliffhanger.

We naturally want to get on to Jesus showing up. But before we do, there is something in today's passage we should not miss. It is: **God uses all sorts.**

In this Gospel we find three characters worthy of our examination.

First, there is Mary Madalene. All we are told specifically about her past in scripture is

that Jesus had cast out from her seven devils. He had given her back her life.

Because of what Jesus had done for her, none love Him more. It has been said, “She was last at His cross and first at His grave.”

Her faithfulness, moreover, was rewarded. She went on to be the first witness of the resurrection. It was her privilege to be the ‘apostle’ to the Apostles.

What I mean by ‘apostle to the Apostles’ is that it was she who carried the message to Peter and John that the tomb was empty.

Some may have viewed her as a person with a dodgy past. But in God’s eyes she was a chosen vessel. Mary reminds us that “every saint has a past and every sinner a future.”

The second in our cast of characters is Peter. He was an impulsive soul. We see this trait

exhibited as he pushes past John and enters the tomb first.

He was plain-spoken, honest, bold and well-meaning, but had his weaknesses as well.

For example, Peter's protestations of loyalty made prior to Jesus' arrest were soon left behind. Fear got the best of him. Three times before the sun had risen Peter denied even knowing Jesus.

Yet, God used him mightily. Peter went on to preach the first Christian sermon on Pentecost and to become the recognized leader of the new Christian Church.

And then there was John. He is the third in our cast of characters. He is referred to in the Fourth Gospel as "the disciple whom Jesus loved." He was younger than Peter and more reflective in his thinking.

John was likewise a chosen vessel. Not only did he go on to write the Gospel that bears his name, Jesus, while on the cross, entrusts to him the care of His mother.

Mary, Peter and John remind us that God uses people of all sorts . . . men and women as well as people of various background and temperaments.

What about you? What about me? Can God use us? /// Absolutely.

We are called not only to believe as John believed, but to go out and do . . . to bear the messages glorious . . . to be witnesses.

Easter people are to be people on the move.

What about you and me? Are we stepping up to the plate? Are we fulfilling our high calling?

Or, are we on-and-off-again followers?

Easter is a good time to reflect:

If this Christianity business is real, it should inform all we think, say and do . . . how we view and treat others, how we use our time and resources, how we approach both life and death. Is it?

“Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!” is a lovely Easter greeting. But is also a summons. It is a summons to follow Jesus, day by day.

If Jesus can use Mary, Peter and John, He can use you. You are a chosen vessel.

Without delay answer His call. Say:
“Wherever He leads I’ll go.”