

TOUCH ME NOT
27th March 2016
Easter Day
St Michael, Cornhill
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‘Thank God for a bright beautiful happy Easter Day. When all the people had left the Church and no one remained but the Clerk putting away the sacred vessels I walked alone round the sunny peaceful churchyard and visited the graves of my sleeping friends Jane Hatterell, May Jefferies, Anne Hawkins. . . George Bryant, Limpedy Buckland the gipsy girl, and many more. There they lay, the squire and the peasant, the landlord and the labourer, young men and maidens, old men and children, the infant of days beside the patriarch of five score years; sister, brother by the same mother, all in her breast their heads did lay, and crumble to their common clay. And over all she lovingly threw her soft mantle of green and gold, the greensward and the buttercups, daisies and primroses. There they lay all sleeping well and peacefully after life’s fitful fevers and waiting for the Great Spring morning and the General Resurrection of the Dead.’

These are just some of Francis Kilvert’s reflections on Easter Day, 16th April 1876, as he ministered in his tiny country parish in the ‘Welsh Marches’. It was the poet William Plomer who stumbled upon Kilvert’s uniquely beautiful prose while searching through files in Bedford Square. Kilvert was curate for seven years to Richard Venables at Clyro in rural Radnorshire, the place he loved best of all. Later, he was curate for four years to his father near Chippenham, and after a year in the remote parish of St. Harman in Radnorshire, he became incumbent of Bredwardine, not far from his beloved Clyro.

Kilvert courted the sweet Ettie Meredith Brown – the piece I read a moment ago also sadly records no letter from her. That relationship was brought to an end by her parents and led to an eighteen month gap in the diary. A year or two later he courted Elizabeth Rowland, whom he married in August 1879. But only a month after the wedding, Kilvert died suddenly and was buried at Bredwardine. Despite the sadness of much of his life, Kilvert always seemed to live the life of the Resurrection. The presence of his Lord breathes through all his writing.

Often his musing is of the richness of the countryside and of the beauty of the flowers and hedgerows. Now, as with Kilvert, Easter always focuses on the *garden* where Jesus was laid and within which the empty tomb and the place of his resurrection was proclaimed. The lovely garden in the north aisle, which Pete, one of our congregation has made for us, and which we have just blessed focuses this for us. It captures the scene described by St. John in our gospel today. Indeed, Mary thought the risen Jesus was the gardener.

Of course, within the gospel tradition there is another very different garden within which Jesus and his disciples found themselves the night of Jesus’ betrayal. Gethsemane breathes an entirely different and dark atmosphere. It reminds us of the integrity of Jesus’ passion, death and resurrection. One does not come without the other. The price of Jesus’ vindication was costly indeed. The scenes in that other garden remind us of that. But this morning we are in the hands of John the evangelist. Here there’s no mention of the garden. Jesus crosses the Kidron Valley to embark upon his way to the scaffold.

For John’s understanding of these three days from crucifixion to resurrection is in sharp contrast to the other three evangelists. In John, the cross acts as both the ultimate instrument of cruelty, tragedy and death, but at the same time it is the instrument of Jesus’ glorification. ‘I, if I be lifted up, will draw all people unto me.’ So John, uniquely among the evangelists, describes the rich garden. It is symbolic of a new world.

The location of the tomb in Mark, Matthew and Luke is unimportant. In John, however, it must be in a *rich garden*. For Jesus is now glorified and the world is renewed, transformed – the world itself is *glorified* in Jesus. The garden, as here in Church, is a place of beauty, glory, new life: the grave clothes are now a brilliant white hanging over the cross which is also the instrument of glory. The completion will come as Jesus is taken to his father. ‘Touch me not for I have not yet ascended’, Jesus says to Mary Magdalene.

I began with Francis Kilvert, for whom, despite the shortness of his life and the trials he had endured, the world was eternally *a resurrection world*. Kilvert’s world is bathed in light, clothed in beauty: it is an Easter world; it is a world ringing with alleluias. On another Easter day, this time in April 1870, Kilvert records his feelings again:

‘As I had hoped, the day was cloudless, a glorious morning. My first thought was ‘Christ is Risen.’ On Easter Day all the young people came out in something new and bright like butterflies. It is almost part of their religion to wear something new on this day. The people stick sprigs of flowers into the churchyard turf. I am thankful to find this beautiful custom on the increase, and observed more and more every year. The happiest, brightest, most beautiful Easter I have ever spent: ‘Christ is Risen!’

Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia.

Amen.

Readings

Isaiah. 65. 17-end

Acts. 10. 34-43.

John. 20. 1-18.