

SERMON AT MASS EASTER SUNDAY 2013

Many years ago, it was common practice when someone died for the body to be kept at the house, on display in the front room.

Life went on around the corpse, and I remember when visiting the bereaved, being asked whether I wanted to view it.

I always agreed, for it was seen as a sign of respect for the deceased, and also as a recognition of what had happened.

The body was the evidence for the death.

It was commonplace for households to keep a store of the materials needed for laying-out the body, should someone die.

One day a neighbour died, and a relative of the deceased came to my grandmother asking whether she had any of the strips of fabric that would be used to position the jaw and limbs.

These were handed over quite naturally, as if in response to an everyday request.

This sort of thing hardly ever happens today, the whole business being taken over by professionals.

Most people, even when a close relative dies, hardly ever encounter the details of the handling of the former habitation of a person they love.

But in the first century, the preparation of a corpse for burial was a familiar procedure.

The story of the raising of Lazarus will be familiar from an earlier part of John's Gospel.

The man had been dead for four days before the Lord got to him.

Well and truly dead, he was, by that time, and in a quite an advanced stage of decay.

Jesus insists on the removal of the stone at the entrance to the tomb and commands Lazarus to come out.

The man emerges, tied up with the grave-clothes and with a cloth over his face.

'Unbind him, let him go free,' says Jesus.

It is the overturning of the finality of death, for nothing can be more certain than that Lazarus is dead.

His body has been prepared for burial and the obsequies took place some days earlier.

This scene is paralleled in today's Gospel reading.

The tomb which the body of Jesus has occupied for three days is the scene.

But there are differences.

The tomb is already open.

It is empty.

The grave-clothes don't restrain the body.

They lie in a heap, and the cloth that had covered the face of the deceased is folded up in a place by itself.

The body has gone.

It could not be restrained by the trappings of death, neither the grave-clothes, nor the stone.

Whatever happened, it is quite clear that something of great power and significance has occurred.

The writer tells us that this discovery alone was enough to convince one of the disciples that Jesus had risen from the dead.

That is how, perhaps sixty-five years after the event, the fourth Gospel describes the experiences of those who found the tomb empty.

It is not possible to say exactly what happened on that Passover weekend.

It is even less of a possibility when you compare John's account with the other three gospels.

We shall never know.

What we can be certain about is the conviction of the first christians about the death of Jesus.

They had seen the death, the end of the story for Jesus and for them.

They had witnessed the burial, the closing of the tomb and the posting of a watch.

And yet, three days later there is the conviction that Jesus has risen from the dead.

They were even more convinced than they had been previously, that Jesus was with them, alive.

The subsequent history of the community into which these people formed themselves witnesses to the continuing life of Jesus, risen from the dead.

The central truth, the central experience of the christian community is that God raises the dead.

Jesus is the firstborn from the dead, and because Jesus is one of us, we share in the risen life.

We too rise from the dead.

This doesn't mean that we can all rise from the tomb like Lazarus.

Nor does it mean that any of us can escape the passage from life to death.

What it does mean is that death can finally hold no terror for us, and that the grave can be seen as the gate of new and eternal life.

The discarded grave-clothes are a sign that the tomb cannot hold Jesus imprisoned.

The risen Lazarus is a sign that those bonds can be freed for us too.

This would be all very well and produce a shrug of the shoulders if our christianity were only about acknowledging historical events from the past, and the Church's year only about commemorating something that was over and done with.

As Jesus Christ shared in our life and joins us in death, so we are invited *now* to share in his death and new life.

We are called actively to acknowledge the risen Christ in our lives, especially by belonging to the Church, which after all was in existence long before anyone got round to writing a gospel.

We are the successors of those first christians, charged here and now to witness to the living, loving God, who raises the dead, and who will raise us.

Through our baptism, the dying and rising of Christ become part of our experience, because in baptism we were buried with him, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the Father's glorious power, we too should begin living a new life.

It is very difficult to feel convinced of any of this when you feel that God is far away, or even when you think there isn't a God at all.

But the whole point about our christian profession is that the salvation, the new and eternal life offered to us by God through Jesus is not because of any merit on our part but simply because God loves us.

God is the initiator.

It is God who comes to us looking for a place in our hearts.

And that space can open to God because God in the first place bares his heart to us in Jesus.

We are assured all along in the christian tradition that it is God who makes the first move.

We are incapable of saving ourselves, and the sign of that is that none of us can escape death.

God joins us in death so that we can join God in life.

There are many possible responses to this realisation.

You will all have your own experiences which confirm your belief that God in Jesus conquers death.

But for the next fifty days the Church invites us to reflect joyfully on the mystery of Christ's victory over death.

It is a time for renewal in the lives of all of us.

But it is especially a time for the renewal of the life we share as members of a community.

What better time for us recall that as members of the one body of Christ we are gathered together, a people called to worship the Father in the Son through the Spirit.

What better time for us to throw out the old yeast of evil and wickedness and to have only the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

What better time for us to recognise that it is not just Lazarus who rises to new life, but also us.

Through his suffering and death, through his victory over the grave, Jesus unbinds our grave clothes and lets us go free.