

Mike's message

Ascension and the Empty Tomb

It seems an age since Easter Day! By the time you read this online or in printed form it'll be the best part of a month since you cracked open your Easter eggs or cut your first slice of Simnel cake.

A month passing by means that Ascension Day is approaching (13th May this year).

Most of what we know about The Ascension is from Luke. He gives us two, differing, accounts in his Gospel (24.50-53) and his Acts of the Apostles (1.6-11). Matthew doesn't mention 'ascension' at all, merely a departure (28.16-20). In the earliest manuscripts of Mark's Gospel there's no mention of it either, indeed there aren't any resurrection accounts at all! He tells us only of frightened disciples gathered around an empty tomb (16.8) - more of that later. Some later manuscripts have the ascension added (16.19-20).

What about John's Gospel? John has no account of the ascension as such but we have this from the account of the first Easter Day. After Mary Magdalene has encountered Jesus, risen from the dead, in the garden he says this:

(John, Chapter 20)

17 Jesus said to Mary, 'Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."' 18 Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

Jesus said, "Do not hold onto me". What are we to make of that? He is saying don't cling to the past, what has been and gone. It's time to move on to new things. Go and tell the others to get ready.

Mark finished his Gospel depicting the women disciples full of fear as they gathered around the empty tomb. But those who heard Mark's Gospel proclaimed to them would have known it was not the end of the story. Frightened disciples would soon be transformed - the Holy Spirit would see to that. But Mark was writing for a community experiencing turmoil. The women's fear would strike a chord with them, maybe it does with us too.

As things change and, for the time being, we come out of lockdown, we need to encourage one another not to cling onto what has been. Not to try and return to everything that we did in the past or at least not in the same ways. We are not people of the empty tomb, rummaging around trying to find what has been and gone. We are people of the resurrection. The physical Jesus has ascended - we are now his body on earth, his community of faith, the church. We don't know what lies ahead but we do know that it'll be different but wherever it takes us - God is with us!

