



A sermon for the Cathedral Eucharist at Wells Cathedral, preached on Sunday 5 April by the Right Reverend Michael Beasley, Bishop of Bath and Wells.

Easter Day Festal Eucharist

What are your favourite kind of stories? Are you a devotee of Harry Potter? Or is Jane Austin more your kind of thing? Is your preference for a whodunnit? Maybe an Agatha Christie or even *The Thursday Murder Club*? Or perhaps you're more a crime thriller kind of person with your nose in a John Grisham or a Patricia Cornwell.

Splendid though all these types of writing are, none of them quite match the archetypal story that as human beings we like most to tell each other. Are you ready? For this story goes like this: Boy meets girl. Stuff happens threatening that boy and girl will not get together. Complications are overcome. Boy and girl get together. They live happily ever after.

I tell you, I could make a fortune out of doing this stuff. JK Rowling and Richard Osman? You'd better watch out!

This morning, the narrative we listened to in our Gospel reading has elements of our archetypal human story in it, though with some subtle twists. So let's listen again to what it says.

Amongst Jesus's friends and followers, one of the closest has been Mary Magdalene. The scriptures tell us that Mary is someone that Jesus has helped deeply, curing her of seven demons. Mary has travelled widely with Jesus and been with him to the very end. Earlier in his Gospel, John tells us that Mary Magdalene, along with Jesus's mother and his aunt, has been one of the three women who have stood at the bottom of Jesus's cross, accompanying him through his final agonies.

Our Gospel today takes up the story on the third day after the crucifixion. The girl Mary Magdalene, goes to the tomb of this boy she has loved, Jesus. If we follow the accounts of the other Gospels, she has gone there to lay out his body properly and anoint it with spices.

It wasn't possible to do this immediately after the crucifixion. There wasn't time before the sabbath began when no such work could be done.

All complicated enough. Only for Mary to discover on her arrival that the stone sealing the tomb has been rolled away. She runs to tell Jesus's best friends Peter and John. They run to the tomb and Mary returns also. When she gets back to the burial site, she discovers that not only has the stone been rolled away, but the tomb itself is empty.

And then comes the encounter that Hollywood, had this been a film, would have made the climax of the whole story. Mary meets Jesus. Girl meets boy. Only she doesn't recognise him. She thinks he's the gardener. It's only when Jesus says her name, Mary, that this girl realises, against all odds and against all normal expectation that Jesus is alive. Mary is in the presence of the boy she loves.

Were this a Netflix made for TV mini-series, this is where boy Jesus would have swept girl Mary up into his arms, kissed her and for them then to depart the scene to live happily ever after in a homestead in Galilee. But this is not what the story says. This is where the twist comes. It would seem that Mary reaches out to Jesus for he says to her '*Do not hold on to me.*' This isn't a story just for me and you. Mary and Jesus, boy and girl. It's not just for us. This is a story that's going to take in many others, many nations, many peoples. This is a story for everyone in the whole wide world.

It's the story that Jesus's friend Peter takes up in the first reading we listened to this morning from the Bible's Book of Acts. All the power, all the love, all the life, all the glory that raised Jesus from the dead has been at work too in Jesus's friends. Jesus's resurrection life has sent them out with centrifugal force to witness to the entire world that the Jesus is alive.

And that in Jesus can be found the peace, the new beginnings, the reconciliation that is the longing of every human heart, breaking down every barrier that exists between us. Peter's speech in Acts happens immediately after he, in Jesus' name, has begun the work of breaking down one of the greatest and most ancient divisions this world has ever known; the division between Jews and Gentiles. The words we listened to earlier are spoken during Peter's encounter with someone with whom a good Jewish boy like Peter would never have been seen, a gentile Roman centurion, Cornelius. Yet Peter tells Cornelius that he and everyone who accepts the risen Jesus as their saviour can come home to God. All, no matter who they are or what their background, can know forgiveness in Jesus's name. And as the story continues, this is what happens. The Holy Spirit falls upon Cornelius and the Gentiles around him. Peter baptises them. Enmity and division are overcome.

Cornelius and the Gentiles are brought into the company of the saved. This is the universal story, bigger and greater even than our stories of boy meets girl. The story that each of us is invited to enter into this Easter. It's for all of us. From wherever we've come. Whoever we are. Whatever we're like.

Now you'd be forgiven if you thought this invitation was an ask to become just one more person in an organisation with a two thousand year history, to be found on every continent, having some billions of followers. Another institution – the religious arm of the UN, or Rotary, or the Girl Guides, dedicated to the overcoming of divisions, of promoting the common good, of seeking peace around our world. These things are undoubtedly what Christians do, but they're not what's at the heart of the whole thing.

At the very centre of faith and trust in Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, is the invitation to allow him to speak today our names direct into our hearts, just as he spoke the name of Mary Magdalene in that garden all those centuries ago. The risen Jesus calls each of us by name today – Michael, Toby, Megan, Anne, Sarah, James, Kate, Philip. Whatever your name is, Jesus is calling you personally by it. Jesus invites us to bring all that we are, all our history, all our background, all our hurts, all our triumphs, everything that makes us 'us' into relationship with him who loves you and knows us and died for us and rose for us into the new life that can be ours today and always. To make his story, our story.

Just like Mary Magdalene, none of us gets to keep all this story to ourselves. As Jesus said to Mary back then he says to us now '*Do not hold on to me*'.

And just as Jesus went on to challenge Mary back then, he makes the same challenge to us today. For what did Jesus say to Mary but this? 'Don't keep this to yourself. It's not just for you. Go to my brothers and sisters and say to them '*I have seen the Lord!*'. On that first Easter morning, that's just what Mary did. She went from Jesus to witness to what she had seen and what she had understood. She becomes the apostle to the apostles, the witness to the witnesses. On this Easter morning, will you make this part of your story too?

Amen.

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