**Easter Eve 2017 – Saturday 15th April**

Exodus 14. 10 – end, 15. 20 – 21
Romans 6. 3 – 11
Matthew 28. 1 -10

Prayer

The Lord is risen, Alleluia! One of the great joys of having a three- year cycle of readings means that one has the opportunity to spend time with each of the resurrection accounts and to discover something new each time. As I was reflecting on Matthew’s account earlier today, there were three words, which forced their way into my consciousness: see, fear and joy (those go together) and quickly.

The two women are described as going to see the tomb. They are not described as having anything specific to do when they get there and I was reminded of the many people I encounter in the churchyard who have come to spend time at the graves of those they have loved. Yes, sometimes they are tending the grave, tidying it up and putting flowers there but equally some are simply spending time there. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were those who had witnessed Joseph of Arimathea putting Jesus’ body into the tomb and now they have returned, after the Sabbath, to see it, to spend time there. Of one thing we may be absolutely certain, they were not expecting to find an angel. The angel, in what is almost a creed-like statement “Jesus who was crucified. He is not here. He has been raised.” Tells them what has happened but then invites them to “Come and see the place where he lay”. They are not to rely simply on words but to corroborate these words with the evidence of their eyes. The angel then gives them a message for the disciples telling them that they are to go to Galilee where they will see Jesus, a message which is repeated word for word by Jesus when the two women are themselves met by him. It is to be noted that the women are being entrusted with this message. Women were not normally deemed to be reliable witnesses so already we are in the realm of the new, the realm of transformation. The resurrection then is not simply to be founded on story but on concrete evidence, an empty tomb and Jesus himself, both of which can be seen. When the women are met by Jesus we are told that they took hold of his feet and worshipped him. This might seem a strange detail but Matthew is stressing the fact that Jesus is not a ghost. It was generally believed in the culture of the time that ghosts did not have feet. This Jesus whom they see is real. He has been raised. He has not been brought back to life, as Lazarus and the son of the widow of Nain were brought back to life, to the same life that would come to an end in death. He has been raised. His is a resurrection life in which he is alive for all eternity. Here we are dealing with something new, with transformation. The disciples and the women experience his physical presence, they see him and they see his wounded hands and feet but he is no longer bounded by place and time. He has been through the portal of death and will die no more. The resurrection has brought us reconciliation for ever – note that Jesus refers to his disciples as his brothers. Their failures, their running away has been erased as have our failures, our denials, our cowardice.

My second word was fear. The guards who have been keeping watch at the tomb are terrified by the earthquake and the sight of an angel. You will remember that there was an earthquake at the death of Jesus, an earthquake which resulted in the centurion’s words “This man truly was the son of God”. So both the death and resurrection of Jesus are accompanied by an earthquake, events that herald the last times. But if the first earthquake results in one or more soldiers coming to faith, the second one has no such effect. Their fear is not the fear that comes with awe and reverence. Their fear is accompanied by shaking, by trembling and they become as dead men. Both the angel and Jesus address the women, telling them not to be afraid, a phrase repeated again and again in the Old Testament when God is addressing his people. These are words that come from the mouth of God. The women are described as leaving the tomb quickly with fear and joy. They have not been rendered unable to act but they are filled with fear, an awed fear, because they are aware that they have been in the presence of a direct messenger from God. The description of the angel takes us back to the Transfiguration when Jesus’ clothes became dazzling white. The angel may be a messenger but a messenger whose very appearance speaks of the glory of God. The empty tomb and the words of the angel fill them with fear and joy. They have been told that Jesus is risen. The evidence is compelling and fills them with joy that those dark hours of desolation have been swept away and something new has occurred, a new age has dawned, a joy that is hand in hand with wonder and awe.

My final word was quickly and its synonyms. The earthquake happens suddenly. The women are told to go quickly and tell the disciples. They left the tomb quickly. They ran. Suddenly Jesus met them. I often say, and I think with justification, that one of the most frequently used words in Mark’s Gospel is immediately, but in these 10 verses at the beginning of the final chapter of Matthew’s Gospel there is real sense of urgency. The message of the resurrection is not to be sat upon but communicated and it is to be communicated so that the disciples can return to the place of ministry. Galilee is where it all began and it is in Galilee that Jesus will hand over to the disciples the task of proclaiming and living out the kingdom of God, the task of proclaiming his life, death and resurrection as that which brings about transformation and reconciliation.

So three words, see, fear and joy, suddenly. How are these to shape our keeping of this most wonderful of all feasts? The message of the resurrection is one of transformation and reconciliation. The Lord is risen and because he is risen all our failings can never stand in the way of God’s love for us. If we think back over this week, as we consider the betrayals, the denials, the fickle nature of the crowd, the jealousy and hypocrisy of the establishment, the brutality, the weakness all that was hurled at Jesus, his resurrection says that despite all this he is here for us, nothing we can do will make him love us less and nothing we do will make him love us more. And this is no idle tale. The women saw the empty tomb and encountered the risen Christ. This message is one for the whole world and must fill us with joy. I know that we can look around the world and feel saddened but at our hearts we are to carry the joy and awe of the resurrection because it will transform our life and the lives of those with whom we come into contact and if you imagine that many times over then know that we are bearers of hope for the world. This is an urgent task. It was a matter of urgency that the disciples take on the mantle of Jesus, having spent three years with him in apprenticeship as it were. This is an urgent task for us too and we must not neglect it for the sake of the world. We are to shout from the rooftops that Jesus Christ is risen and express that risen life with every fibre of our being, every moment of every day. I wish you all a very joyous Eastertide and lots of chocolate!