

PREGO EXTRA

Background notes
for the Gospels of
EASTERTIDE 2011
Year A



EASTER Sunday John 20: 1-9

The empty tomb

No evangelist describes the actual resurrection, yet it is at the core of our Christian faith.



There are slight discrepancies between the accounts of the different gospel writers and John's version, probably as a result of oral transmission of events and the specific preoccupations or focus of the different evangelists.

John gives the fullest description of events around the resurrection; he has a keen eye for detail.

It was very early in the morning and still dark

The time of day is significant. Throughout John's gospel we find this contrast between light and darkness. The gloom echoes the way Mary feels at the death of her friend Jesus. It could also reflect her lack of understanding of the events which have taken place.

They have taken the Lord



Mary assumes that the body has been stolen. Grave robbing was a common crime at the time. Rome had issued an imperial edict against it.

We don't know ...

Although only Mary Magdala is mentioned by name here, she was not alone at the tomb. Indeed the other evangelists mention several women by name (Mary, the mother of James, Salome, Joanna) Mary is a key witness at the death and resurrection of the Lord. John, always respectful of women— see the account of the Samaritan woman at the well or Martha, Lazarus' sister— gives her a prominent part, despite the contemporary culture where women had a very low social status and importance.

Peter and the "beloved" disciple

Tradition and scholars, on the whole, agree that "the beloved disciple" is John, son of Zebedee. There are many instances in John's gospel where "the other disciple" is given more prominence than Peter. (13:23, 18:15, 19:26, 21:7)

Here though, the evangelist is more balanced. Yes, John arrives first at the tomb but it is Peter who goes into the tomb.



The account reflects what we know of the two men's personalities. Peter, the impulsive one, shows initiative and leadership by going into the tomb, but it is John who first believes in the resurrection of Jesus.

Peter bent down into the tomb

Despite the way in which artists over the centuries have depicted the empty tomb, archaeological research shows that, at the time, a 3-foot tall entrance led into cave-like tombs.

The linen cloths



John gives a very specific account of the position and state of the linen cloths. The carefully folded linens attest to the fact that the body has not been stolen or spirited away. John's audience will remember Lazarus emerging from his tomb "his feet and hands bound with bands of stuff and a cloth round his face."

They had failed to understand the teaching of Scripture.

The disciples needed to experience the resurrection to understand the Old Testament prophecies. In fact, there are not many references to Resurrection in Scripture (Hosea 6:3, Jonah 2:1, Isaiah 53:10-13, Psalm 16: 8-11). They will only fully understand after Pentecost.

2nd Sunday of Easter John 20: 19-31

Jesus appears to the disciples and to Thomas

John's intent

In chapter 20, John is concerned with the different ways in which the characters involved, come to believe in the risen Lord.

Following her initial disbelief (see last week), Mary only recognises the Risen Lord when she sees him and hears him speak her name.(20:16-18)

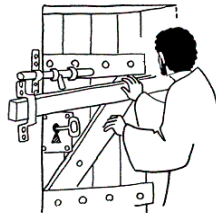
It was only 'the other disciple' who, according to John, believed immediately on entering and seeing the empty tomb.

From fear to joy.

This week, we continue with John's account of the Resurrection appearances moving from the empty tomb to the upper room where we 'witness' two scenes taking place eight days apart.

The first event highlights the dramatic change in the mood of the disciples.

They were terrified that those who were responsible for Jesus' death might hunt them down and kill them too.



But now, [they] '*were filled with joy when they saw the Lord...*'

This is the fulfilment of Jesus' words to them before his crucifixion, (see John16:22) '*...you are sad now, but I shall see you again, and your hearts will be full of joy,...*' For them too, belief came through seeing.

From doubt to belief.

The second event occurs eight days later when Jesus returns to the upper room and invites Thomas to touch his wounds.

The disciple had doubted that his friends had seen the Lord. Jesus is giving him the proof he needs to believe that he has indeed risen.

He urges him to '*Doubt no longer, but believe.*'

We are not told if Thomas did accept Jesus' invitation to touch him, but he is now able to make his profession of faith: '*My Lord and my God!*'



A note to the reader.

John concludes his account of these appearances by speaking directly to us.

The events he has chosen to record are those which he believes will best lead us to grow in faith in the person of Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God.

He is reviewing the disciples' different reactions for the benefit of the people of his own time, his fellow first century Christians.

Scholars believe that John intended these verses (30-31) to conclude his gospel and that chapter 21 is a later addition.



3rd Sunday of Easter Luke 24: 13-35

Meeting the Risen Lord on the road to Emmaus

This well known story is only to be found in Luke's gospel.



That very same day

This is the day the Jews termed "the first day of the week". This story happens on the same day as the empty tomb discovery. That same evening Jesus appears to the disciples in Jerusalem and a week later to Thomas.

The disciples continued to meet and break bread together on that same day. By the first century it is called "the Lord's day" and is commonly kept among Christians in mid- second century instead of the traditional Jewish Sabbath (Saturday). In 321, Emperor Constantine, a sun-god worshipper, decreed that workers should rest on that day.

Emmaus

The exact geographical location of this village is disputed. Some think that it was the Palestinian village of Imwas or Amwas on the Jerusalem road, but it is 20 miles away and so precludes the 2 companions having done the journey there and back in one day. Others think it is more likely to be El-Qubeibeth, which lies 8 miles north west of Jerusalem.

Cleopas

According to Eusebius, the first great Church historian (circa 300 AD), Cleopas might be Jesus' uncle, the brother of Joseph. This would indicate that his close relatives had not rejected him.

Yet, it also shows that a belief in Jesus' resurrection was not self-evident to his earliest followers.



The other disciple is not named. It is sometimes suggested that it might have been a woman, Cleopas' wife, Mary, mentioned by John as one of the women present at the death of Jesus (Jn 19:26). It could be that Clopas and Cleopas are different spellings of the same name.

Moses, the prophets and the Scriptures

We have here a reference to the whole of the Jewish Bible which is divided in three sections, the Torah, the Prophets and Writings.



They pressed him to stay with them

The custom of hospitality was much more developed than it is now. It involved welcoming strangers and travellers and giving them provisions and protection. Early Christians equate lack of hospitality with a lack of love of God and neighbour. It was common to refrain from asking a guest's identity until they had been fed.

He took, he blessed, he broke, he gave

Although he was the guest, Jesus acts as the head of the household, using words which are almost identical to those of the last Supper (Lke 22:19), and of the feeding of the 5000 thousand (Lke 9:16). Eucharistic liturgies, to this day, retain the same sequence of actions after reading and explaining Scripture.



Their eyes were opened

To open is a key verb in this story. To enable us to experience the Resurrection, Jesus opens our minds to the Scriptures and our hearts and eyes to his presence.

4th Sunday of Easter—John 10: 1-10

Jesus the Good Shepherd

John presents Jesus' ministry between Galilee and Judaea with its major focus on the confrontations in Judaea.

In this first section of Chapter 10, John is writing in the light of the Old Testament text of Ezekiel, chapter 34, in which the prophet challenges the authorities of his time.

They are irresponsible and thieving 'shepherds', ruling the people 'cruelly and violently'. In the final verses, God addresses the people saying: 'And you, my sheep, are the flock I shall pasture, and I am your God - it is the Lord Yahweh who speaks.'

John sees this prophecy being fulfilled in Jesus, the only source of salvation. God has become the shepherd in Jesus the Messiah, Son of David.

The parable of Jesus the Good Shepherd

This story is the only parable in John's Gospel. The evangelist usually uses symbolic discourses.

A parable, *māsāl* in Hebrew, can also mean proverb or riddle.

Some scholars see 2 separate parables in verses 1-5; vv 1-3a showing contrasting approaches to the sheep, whereas, vv 3b-5 focus on the relationship between the sheep and shepherd.

Scholars wonder why this section of John's Gospel immediately follows the story of the 'man born blind'.

It is thought to be a continuation of John's account of the confrontation between Jesus and the unjust authorities. Jesus' love and concern for his sheep stands out in sharp contrast to the bullying Pharisees.



Shepherds in Judaea

The main part of Judaea is a central plateau stretching from Bethel to Hebron, for a distance of about 35 miles and varying from 14 to 17 miles across.

The ground for the most part was rough and stony.

Judaea was much more a pastoral than an agricultural country.

This is why shepherd imagery appears throughout the Bible; the most familiar figure of the Judean uplands is the shepherd.

There were no sheep dogs in Palestine, the sheep knew and only obeyed the voice of their shepherd.

The sheep were kept mostly for their wool and milk, rather than meat, and so were often with the shepherd for some years.

At the end of a day when the sheep were gathered into the fold, the shepherd held his rod across the entrance, quite close to the ground, and each sheep had to pass under it. As they passed beneath the rod, the shepherd examined each one to see if it had been injured during the day.



I am the gate of the sheepfold.



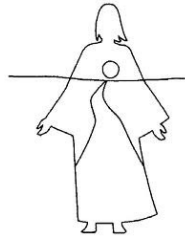
Jesus refers to two different kinds of sheepfold. In winter months the sheep were kept in communal sheepfolds in the villages and towns. They were protected by a strong door to which the guardian had a key. He was the gatekeeper who would let the shepherds in.

In warmer weather the sheep were gathered into hillside sheepfolds, open spaces enclosed by a low wall. There was an opening but no door. At night the shepherd lay down across the opening. The shepherd was literally 'the gate'.

5th Sunday of Easter—John 14: 1-12

I am the way, the truth, the life

This passage, one of the most profound of John's gospel, belongs to the farewell discourses of Jesus.



The ancient world paid great attention to people's final words. They stress the most important things people should remember about the person about to die and also look to the future.

In the Old testament we find them when Jacob blesses his sons (Genesis 49), and also before the death of Moses (Deuteronomy 32) and in King David's farewell to his son Solomon (1 Kings 2).

Do not let your hearts be troubled, trust in God..

The preceding chapter has saddened the disciples and Jesus is reassuring them. The way to reduce worry is to trust in God and have faith. John is writing for 1st century Christians who were often persecuted.

Many rooms in my Father's house

The Father's house is often understood by scholars as a synonym for heaven, but some focus on the more generic meaning of house, that is not a building but a group of people belonging to an extended family.

They see it as a symbol of the intimate relationship between God the Father and Jesus, in which we can all have a share. Whoever is with God is in his "house", and there is room for all.

The last supper is taking place on the night before Passover and the language is reminiscent of Moses addressing the tribes of Israel in the land of Moab, beyond the Jordan. (Deuteronomy 1:29,33)



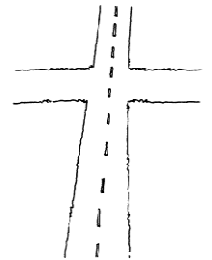
I am the way, the truth and the life

The previous "I am" statements in John's gospel (Jn 4:26, Jn 6:20) show clear parallels with the Old testament revelation formulas (Exodus 3:6,14 and 20:2). Here, Jesus elaborates and gives a fuller explanation of who he is.

The use of "the" in front of all three nouns implies that Jesus is the ONLY way, truth and life. As so often in John's gospel, words can be read at different levels and carry several meanings.

* The way

Can be seen as an actual road or path, but also as the means of getting somewhere. If Jesus is the way, knowing the way is to know Jesus and through him to know the Father. There are no intermediaries. It is also possible that the Way is used in opposition to the Law which the Jews believed to be the only way to God.



* The truth and the life

Jesus is the way because he is the truth and the life. This phrase can be seen as referring back to the Prologue of John's gospel (John 1:14)

Philip: "Let us see the Father"

Jews believed that one could not see the face of God and live (Exodus 33:18-23), so Philip's request is truly amazing but so is Jesus' answer, also referring to John's prologue: he is the Word of God, made flesh and dwelling amongst us.

Jesus is not only talking to Philip but also to all the disciples, to us. It is difficult in an English translation to make a difference between "you" meaning one person and "you" meaning a group of people. The different "you" are interwoven throughout his reply.

6th Sunday of Easter John 14: 15-21 I will not leave you orphans

The Farewell Discourses.

These verses following on from last Sunday's Gospel, continue the Farewell Discourses. Jesus speaks to his disciples of love and indwelling, stressing the union between himself, the Father, and themselves.

If you love me you will keep my commandments.

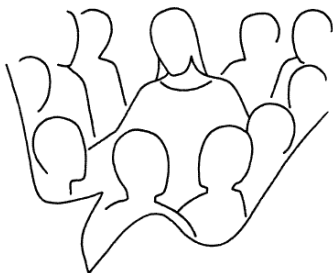
For John the only test of our love of God is obedience. Today's passage contains promises which Jesus makes to those who love him.

Another 'advocate'. (*Paraklētos*)

The advocate mentioned in vv 16-17 is described as the 'successor' to Jesus, the first advocate.

The Greek term used is *paraklētos* which is difficult to translate accurately in English.

It has taken on a number of meanings over time. The word has its origins in legal language and is understood to mean someone who is 'called in'. Perhaps 'called' to give witness in defence of someone in court, or an advocate to plead for someone in times of trouble. It has often been interpreted as Comforter Helper or Mediator.



John's meaning.

No one interpretation of the word *paraklētos* encompasses the meaning intended by John. The Paraclete in John, is a teacher, a witness to Jesus, one who represents the continued presence of Jesus on earth. He is the one who will guide the disciples in the difficult times ahead.

The word *paraklētos* appears only in chapters 14, 15 & 16. It is also used as a title for the risen Christ as intercessor for Christians in 1 John 2:1-2.

The spirit of truth

Truth is one of the characteristics of the Spirit as it was for the first paraclete, Jesus.



The world.

Those who live Godless lives and who cannot accept the Spirit, just as they could not accept the Son and through him the Father.

I will not leave you orphans;

'Orphanos' means without a father, but in the case of students or disciples, it means without a teacher.

I will come back to you.

This refers to Jesus' indwelling presence. '...and you in me and I in you.' v 20, and not to Parousia, (the second coming of Christ).

The promises express the way Jesus will 'return' and so remain present to those who believe. They confirm the tradition which had developed in John's community that the 'divine presence' will only be visible to the eye of faith. The believers will experience the Father, the Son and the Spirit.