

Easter Day - 4th April 2021
All Saints Church Dedworth

Good morning and Happy Easter! I am so delighted to be with you this morning, in person. I must say that I have missed being with people! And I'm very aware that there are not many able to fit into the building at present, but we are warmly aware of others who are joining us online, like a great cloud of invisible witnesses.

I want to start by saying how delighted I am that we have appointed a new vicar for Dedworth. I am very confident that Paul will be a huge blessing to you and the community, as you will be to him and his family. The next time I will be with you will be for his licensing, and that will be the time for thank yous. But today I want to acknowledge the amazing lay team which makes All Saints tick, and which makes the wonderful West Windsor Hub operate day by day. The Hub is extraordinary. I was so proud to have read out your nomination at the High Sheriff's Awards. And way in which the Church has kept going over these months is inspirational, and the work of many people – you know who they are – don't forget to thank them.

It's Easter Day! I hope there is chocolate in your house.

But what are we actually celebrating today?

We piece together, from the readings we've heard, the most amazing story ever told.

In the slowly fading darkness of the early morning, we hear of three women, shivering in the cold, making their way from their homes carrying jars of fragrant spice; meeting at the crossroads; moving silently down the road and into the burial garden.

They realise that they haven't thought this through. The cold, dead body of the one they going to anoint, is in a small burial chamber in the rock, behind a huge stone. The stone is there to deter grave robbers, and isn't designed to be easily moved. How on earth will

they get in? They have a vague idea that someone might be around to help them, but they are actually not thinking straight.

They round the corner to the part of the garden where the cave lies, and as they do they realise that there isn't a stone in front of it, there's a gaping hole. What does that mean? Maybe someone's been here in the night and stolen the body. They hurry anxiously forward and enter the darkness. Their eyes adjust and a tremor of shock goes through them. There's no cold, lifeless body on the stone slab. But a young stranger, who is dressed in brilliant white that seems to shine in the darkness. They're terrified. He speaks; he knows who they are and why they have come. He understands them. *Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified. He has been raised; he's not here.* That's not what they were expecting. Unbelievable, absurd! but he's quietly convincing. And Jesus has certainly gone.

And then this: *Go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.*

It's all too much for them. The shock, the terror, the sheer strangeness of the words. They run, unable to understand what they have heard, unable to speak of it.

But of course the story doesn't end there, or we wouldn't be here. Other accounts of the discovery of the empty cave that morning tell it slightly differently. Luke's account says that the women did go and tell the disciples, who didn't believe a word of it. In John's account, Mary Magdalene sees Jesus, who sends her to tell the others. Matthew reports Jesus saying to them 'Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.' What each account has in common is that it is the women who are the first witnesses of the resurrection of Jesus, the first people to reach that amazing realisation that death was not powerful enough to hold down the lifeforce that was in him – the Life of God. And the women were told to Go and Tell.

And that is what an apostle does. An apostle is someone who is sent. Off you go. Those women were the very first apostles. They did go and tell. We find both the words disciple and apostle in the Bible, and there's a difference between them. A disciple is a student, someone who learns from a teacher. All of us here are disciples of Jesus. We learn from his life and teaching and example about how to live our lives. An apostle is someone who is sent out to deliver or spread those teachings to others. And that should be all of us. Because being Christians is not just about hearing and understanding and practicing our faith. It's not a private thing. It's also about gathering and talking about it, and it's about going and telling. That's why I'm here today.

And what is it that we should tell? What is the message – this life-giving message? The message is the gift of life itself. It's the strange and wonderful story of Jesus Christ, who was and is God, the Source of Love and Life, in a human being. It's the radical and powerful teaching that every single person on the planet is of immeasurable importance to God, and that we are to treat each one as we would treat Christ if he were among us. It's the terrible and glorious story of how he was betrayed and killed by ordinary human beings, like us, whose greed overcame them, whose power and interests were threatened by what he said and how on this day, the third day after his agonising crucifixion, he rose from death to life, and lives for ever, and promises that life to us. *Nothing we do is so terrible that Jesus doesn't forgive it. Nothing is so dark that it can separate us from God's love.*

Who do we tell it to? Everyone we meet. We proclaim it and we live it; say it in words, spoken and written; we say it in acts of love; we carry it with us in our bodies as we use them to serve others. We go out full of the excitement and the energy of the Holy Spirit to live and work to God's praise and glory.

And how shall we respond to this amazing news? How does it change us? It changes us from being OK with just existing, getting through our lives day by day, slogging up a hill for meaningless weeks, months and years with nothing to look forward to except just stopping – to knowing that our lives have meaning and purpose; to knowing why we are here. It is news which teaches us to dance, to love, to enjoy every minute because every minute has God's imagination and grace in it. It enables us to say yes to whatever comes, knowing that some of it will be easy and some will be hard, some joyous and some painful. But also knowing that Jesus rose from the dead, and that with God holding us and enfolding us, we are OK now and for ever.

Death will come to each of us. We don't know where or when. For most of us it will be at the end of a long life, but there is no avoiding it. And when that time comes, we will either stop and not exist any more, or we will go through an amazing transformation – the one that Jesus went through – and enter a reality which is a million times more real than this one.

So let's go and tell this Easter. Let's make sure that people know why we have skip in our step and gladness in our hearts. We have good news to share. And we hear the voice of the angel: Do not be afraid.