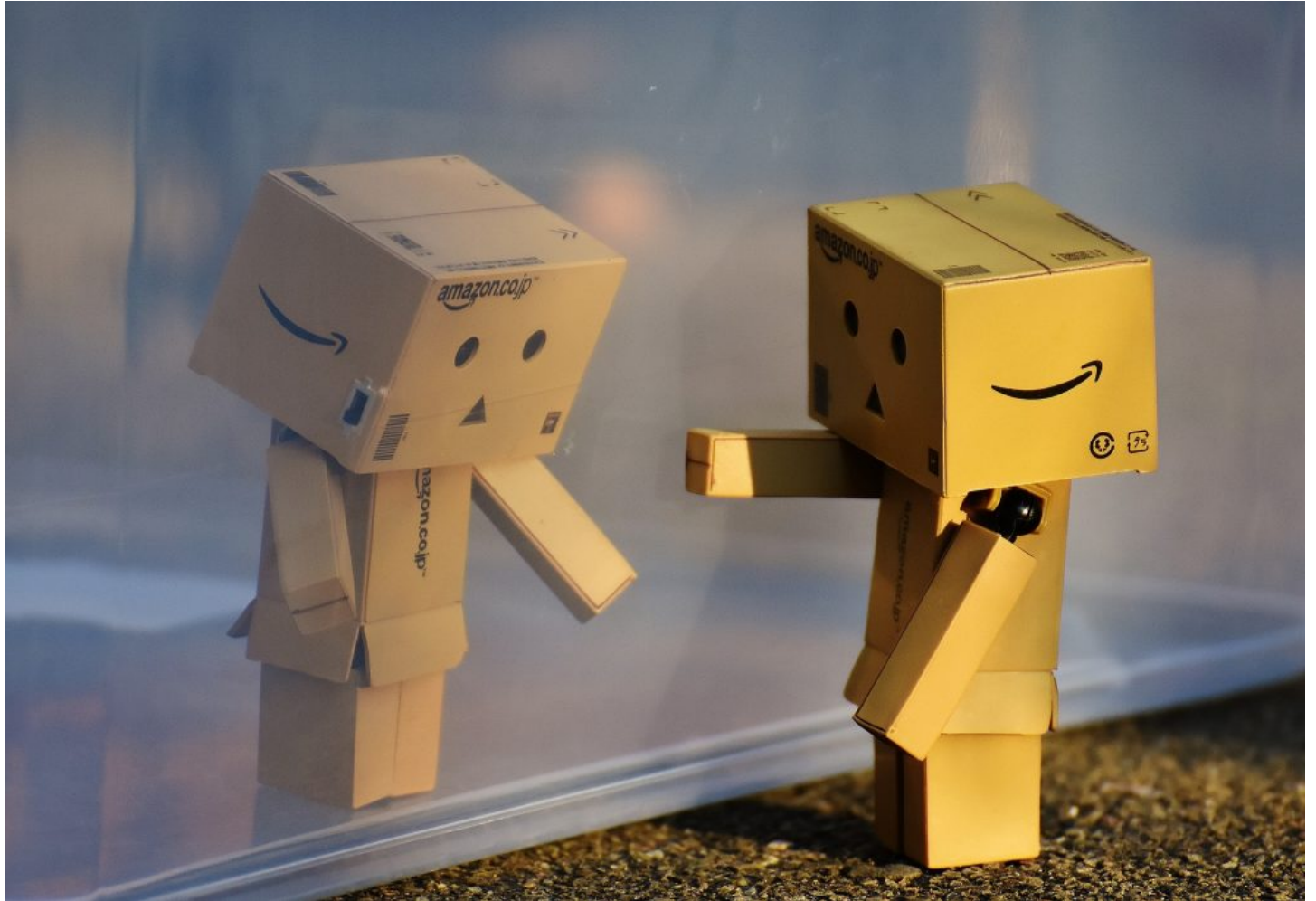


First Contact

April 12, 2020

By Rev Paul Graham

Read John 20:1-18



John's gospel account of the first Easter Sunday gives insight into both the prevailing culture and the challenge to it that Jesus presents time and again.

The first person at the tomb in the early hours of Sunday morning, so early that dawn has yet to break, is Mary Magdalene. A woman who tradition has, possibly inaccurately, portrayed as a woman of questionable morals, she is the first one to witness the empty space formerly occupied by Jesus' wrapped corpse.

Culture and local law dictated that a woman was deemed an unreliable witness, so she had to get the story corroborated by two men, whose testimony would stand scrutiny in court. Peter and "the one Jesus loved" are these two upstanding members of the community who go into the tomb and return home, as baffled as Mary as to the absence of Jesus. The author, from his privileged position of knowing how the story ends, makes it plain that any belief that these two professed is to Mary's story, rather than in the miraculous resurrection that has taken place.

"Seeing is believing" is the old adage that applies here so vividly. There are now three people who have

seen the evidence of the empty tomb but have so far been unable to make the illogical leap to the real reason for Jesus' missing body. This comes later.

Mary, hanging around once the others have gone home, next encounters two angelic beings who have taken up temporary residence on the shelf where Jesus' empty graveclothes have been neatly folded. Like the White Queen in Alice's Adventures through the Looking Glass, Mary appears willing to believe up to six things before breakfast, so seems to take this in her stride. Her greatest concern is not for the sudden increase in the living population of the cave, but in the continuing mystery surrounding her Lord's missing body.

He must have been taken, stolen by some faceless authority or grave robbers. It doesn't seem to occur to her that the perpetrators could be sitting unconcernedly in front of her. Or indeed, that the mysterious figure she assumes to be the gardener isn't one of the culprits, trying to make his getaway from the scene of the crime.

Blinded by her grief and loss, without even a body to anoint with spices and tears, Mary is bereft, unable to recognise the familiar face before her. Or is he? Was she unable to recognise him, such was the difference made by crucifixion, death and resurrection?

Whatever caused her brief ignorance, it was when he used her name that the penny dropped. Clinging onto him for dear life, trusting in touch as well as her eyes and ears that this is no ghost, no spirit, but true flesh-and-blood Messiah.

We go on to read about Jesus and his evening encounter with the other 10 disciples and, later still, with Thomas included. And that's not to mention the miraculous catch of fish and the breakfast barbecue on the shores of Galilee. There's plenty to be said about these post-resurrection gatherings, but let's focus on Easter in the context of today.

Easter Sunday has started early for me over the last few years, with a few hardy souls getting together down at the Country Park for an almost-daybreak Easter Communion. It's been a privilege to share these moments and I've been told that even the locals have received our a cappella singing in good spirit. Of course, the lure of bacon sandwiches back at the church is a bonus...

But again, like so much of our lives, we face a different Easter this year. At the beginning of Lent, none of us could have envisaged celebrating the risen Saviour in such circumstances as these. Instead of singing together in church, we'll be at home, joining with others either via the internet, radio, TV or the phone. None of which is entirely satisfactory, as hard as we all might try. What we lack is exactly what Mary enjoyed: the joy of touching someone outside our home. Just as Mary flung her arms around her Messiah in the garden, we long to embrace our sisters and brothers in Christ.

But not today.

Today we must remain in our homes, our own upper rooms as it were, separated from one another by the very real threat of a deadly virus. In a way, we're having the longest Holy Saturday ever; we can relate to the separation of the other Mary from her son and the disciples from their friend and companion. Unlike them, though, we are yet to experience the joy of reunion; for us, our Easter Sunday encounters are still to come. And that's assuming that we don't suffer the pain of bereavement before the relief of meeting.

But that's also key to the message of Easter Sunday. Jesus has "travelled to the far country" and it is beyond death that he is reunited with friends and family. It is through the embrace of Mary Magdalene, the sensation of Christ's breath on his disciples' amazed faces and in the sharing of a fishy breakfast that proved the reality of resurrection; that life after death was evident in first century Israel.

We don't know what the ultimate end of our journey through the COVID-19 crisis will be. But what we do have is the confidence that comes with Easter Sunday; that even death will not separate us from the love of God through Christ. This is the promise of Easter.

Amen.

(Image by [Alexas_Fotos](#) from [Pixabay](#))