

April 28, 2019 St. Philip, 8, 9, 11:15. John 20:19-31 Sermon Preached at St. Philip Anglican Church, Oak by The Rev. Dr. David Rolfe

In England – Low Sunday – March 6 – April 21, roller coaster, emotionally, intellectually. Today, reflect on a theme in the background. Friendship between Jesus and his followers.

They had travelled together for months. Jesus teaching them in more depth than the crowds they encountered. All the Gospels record a turning point. See Matthew 16, 17 and 20. Jesus plainly told them that the Son of Man, a title Jesus borrowed for himself from the Book of Daniel, would go to Jerusalem, be arrested, killed, and, rise to life again on the third day. He taught this in the context of passages from the Books of Moses, and the prophets. Peter exploded: no way! We cannot allow you to let this happen. Jesus told Peter not to tempt him.

When they got to Jerusalem, soon after what we call Palm Sunday, Jesus told them, “I love you, just as my Father loves me. Remain in this love.” [Jn 15.9] Remain, abide, rest, stay, relax into. Intimacy of deep friendship. When you have told someone, “I love you”, what goes on in your heart? You are open, vulnerable, expectant? What do you want in return? The Gospel does not record any feedback from the disciples. A few minutes later, he told them he no longer called them servants, he called them friends. Again, no record of a response. Why not? Were they silent? Buttoned up?

Later that week, between the Last Supper and the arrest of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus tells the disciples, “All of you will abandon me.” Peter leads the charge, denies he will ever abandon Jesus, he would rather die than do that. The others mutter similar affirmations. [Mt 26.31-35]

When Jesus is arrested, Peter initially puts up a fight, then the disciples fade into the background, Peter denies that he even knows Jesus. In less than 24 hours, Jesus is dead. Let’s look at what the Gospel tells us about Jesus’ friends.

Who stood by Jesus when he was hanging on the cross? Luke, the only evangelist who was not present in Jerusalem when Jesus was killed tells us that all those who knew Jesus personally, plus the women from Galilee were present. The other three evangelists, Matthew, Mark and John, who were in Jerusalem during that crisis, tell us that Mary Magdalene was there. Each evangelist mentions an assortment of two other women. John also tells that the disciple Jesus loved was there. Do you notice who was not present?

After Jesus died, all four evangelists record that Joseph of Arimathea took care of burial details, using his own newly cut rock tomb. Mark and Matthew tell us that Mary Magdalene helped, plus two other women; Luke records other women helping. John mentions only Nicodemus assisting Joseph. Who was not present?

Who first witnessed the resurrection? Matthew tells us that Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to the tomb early Sunday morning. An angel told them Jesus had been raised from the dead and that the two women were to tell the others this good news. Jesus appeared and told them, "peace be with you." Later Jesus appeared to the 11 male disciples in Galilee, they worshipped him, although some of them doubted.

Mark writes that Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of Jesus, and Salome saw an angel at the tomb who told the women to tell the disciples to meet him in Galilee. The women were terrified, and told no one. The alternate ending to Mark's Gospel records that the women told the other disciples, who did not believe them.

Luke writes that Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of Jesus and other women went to the tomb. An angel told them to inform the rest of the disciples that Jesus was raised from the dead. The women told the disciples who thought this was nonsense. However, Peter ran to the tomb and found it empty.

Meanwhile, Cleopas and his friend were leaving Jerusalem, depressed, believing that Jesus was dead, the hope of Israel destroyed. They met Jesus on the road to Emmaus, didn't recognize him, despite him teaching them about his destiny as he had in the past, but they did recognize him when he broke the bread at the supper table.

John writes that early Sunday morning, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb, found it open. She recognized Jesus after initially thinking he was the gardener. Jesus told her to tell the others what she had seen. Peter rushed to the tomb with another disciple. The other disciple saw the empty tomb and believed.

What does this quick summary tell you about friendship? Mary Magdalene was the consistent friend. Where were the men when Jesus needed them? They had heard all the teaching about the destiny of Jesus, from Jesus himself, over many months. They knew the facts: for some reason they couldn't see themselves living in what they had been taught.

They had firmly said they would not abandon him. And yet. John tells us in today's Gospel reading that the 11 disciples were in a room, behind locked doors, frightened. They knew they had been the worst kind of friends to Jesus. Did they imagine the anguish he suffered when they abandoned him? A sobering reminder that it doesn't matter how much Biblical teaching we know, it's what we allow to happen in our lives that counts. Our faith is for living, not cataloguing.

Jesus appears. Perhaps if you or I had confronted a group of faithless friends we would have unloaded hurt and anger on them. How do you relate to friends who let you down? Did the disciples expect an angry telling off from Jesus? Instead Jesus says, "Peace be with you." The deep words of forgiveness, friendship renewed, friendship embraced. He goes on to repeat the teaching he had shared many times in the past. The disciples were filled with joy. If you felt totally forgiven, deep friendship renewed, reinstated after you had been a total jerk, joy would bubble up. No more fear. John wrote in one of his letters that, "Perfect love, gets rid of fear." You know this, the disciples experienced this then.

What touches me about all of this is that Jesus told his friends, "I love you, in the same way the Father loves me. Abide in this love." It wasn't until they responded, with joy, that they became alive in the friendship, more than just students. Soul friends. In the same way that when someone you love says to you, "I love you", the relationship does not deepen until you say or act with deep love. Both people open up. This makes joy in the relationship.

Over 600 years ago, the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* wrote that God can never be reached by thought, but only by love.

The disciples only grew in faith and wholeness, and let go of fearfulness when they knew they were loved by Jesus, and expressed their love for him in response. It was love going both ways that made a cosmic difference. You know this works in your day-to-day life at home too. How about you and me. Is our relationship with Jesus a real friendship?

A reciprocal relationship of love?

Can you sing, and notice how these words do or do not touch you personally?

"Jesus loves me, this I know, in response I love him so!"

Acapella one verse and chorus at each service