

The Bishop's Pastoral Letter, 15th April, 2020
"They left the tomb quickly, with fear and great joy." (Matthew 28.8)

It is clear from the Gospel stories that the Resurrection of Jesus took the disciples by surprise. The stories in the four Gospels read slightly differently, but a common thread is the chaotic and shambolic response of the disciples: confusion, hope, faith, disbelief, and here in Matthew's Gospel, "Fear and great joy."

Key women disciples went to the tomb early on Easter morning intending to finish the embalming process and expecting to have to find a way to tackle the heaviness of the stone sealing the tomb; they came away, having experienced the emptiness of the tomb and the presence of strange angelic figures who communicated the message of resurrection. This filled them with hope, but also bewilderment, not sure what they believed.

This mixture of emotions is very similar to what many of us are experiencing at the moment. There are the beauty of the Spring, happy moments with family in the household or over social media, but also the fear of infection, the sad news of people close to us suffering, which create in us a mixture of emotion. Are we to be happy, sad, frightened or joyful?

The central message of the visit to the tomb is that God takes the heaviness of the stone sealing the tomb and dislodges it with his action of raising Jesus from the dead. He wishes to take our heaviness away and imbue in us instead the joy of new life and hope. It is not so much that God will magically remove the challenges, but calls us to see them in a new perspective, in which the power and promise of the Resurrection tells us that in God, there is a victory to be won.

The question is whether we will allow God to work the changes needed in our hearts, and orient us towards joy. Now that we have celebrated a virtual Easter, there comes the reminder that the Resurrection is not only about what happened then, but how Jesus seeks to bring new life into our situations now. We may well be embarking on the coming weeks with a sense of fear – the chance of infection coming our way is still high – but God wants to encourage us to go forward in joy also, knowing that Jesus has won the victory over the perils of evil, suffering and death to become a source of life, of strength and of hope.

I am grateful to all my clergy who have been finding new ways to bring help and succour to you, and inventive ways to invite you into worship and faith at this time. Most of what I have seen has been of a very high standard, and makes me think that we are learning a new way of being virtual Church which will impact on us in a permanently different way of engaging with faith and worship in the future. As we move into the fifty days of Easter, let us resolve to discover how God's message of new life in Resurrection can assist us to discover new things in life and the journey of faith which we can carry into the future – not just ways of worship, but life-changing decisions about our discipleship which will bring us closer to the Risen Lord and open our hearts more fully to the grace and strength and faith which he longs to impart to us.

Dear friends, keep well and keep safe at this time, and may the Risen Lord sustain you in unexpected ways, to lift the heaviness of fear with the light of his love,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Gregory James". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping flourish at the end.

Bishop of St Asaph