

"They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him."



In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

This is really not the way Easter should be. Sitting at home a message to people a stone's throw away from me who I am not allowed to see for fear of a public health emergency. Whilst I understand the genuine concerns over the real difficulties posed by the Coronavirus, I am also deeply uncomfortable about the Church not being deemed to be an 'essential service'. I worry that we have been far too gung-ho about closing our church buildings and rolling over and accepting the government's line on public protection. All the while I can stroll into a shop with not a care in the world to buy whatever I like because it is 'essential'. I do not understand why we did not do more to argue for the essential nature of the Church and the sacraments. There are plenty of examples around the world where the Church has been able to adapt to the circumstances and continues offering services in a way that maintains social distance and keeps everyone safe, but the Church of England has failed to articulate alternatives and has instead decided that remote forms of Church are an acceptable alternative. The consequence of this is that we as a Church are kept from celebrating the moment our faith was born and our salvation was won. Celebrating the very reason for our existence, the very essence of what it means to live is 'not essential'. I fear that we, as a Church, have collectively forgotten the words of Christ in John chapter 6 "**I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.**"? The alternative we seem to be offering is, 'I am the bread of life, but you'd better go to the local supermarket instead, just to be on the safe side.' The Church, it seems, cannot be trusted to hand out bread, but a supermarket can be, even though we've been doing it for 2000 years.

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We should, at this time turn to Mary at the tomb. Seeing the tomb empty she runs off to Simon Peter and the beloved disciple and announces "**They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.**" Martha struggles at first to comprehend what has happened to the Lord, his body is not where it should be. Should we perhaps think of our Church's at this time like the empty tomb? Gazing upon them, knowing they are empty, do we perhaps feel that "**They have taken the Lord**"? Mary's first reaction was to speak with others and tell them of her fear. We are restricted to the telephone and the internet, but is there a fear in all of us that "**They have taken the Lord**"?

When the beloved disciple reaches the tomb, he sees things differently, the Scripture tells us that "**He saw and believed**". Whilst not fully understanding, the emptiness of the tomb was, for him, a validation of his faith. I am not saying that the Church's being empty is a validation of our faith, but perhaps we need to look upon the closed buildings as a symbol of something greater.

"**Woman, why are you weeping?**" This is, I think a direct address to us. Why are we weeping? What are we mourning? Stephen Cottrell, the next Archbishop of York recently wrote about the opportunities presented to us by the crisis to think about living differently.<sup>1</sup> We are being forced to slow down, to re-evaluate what is important and necessary in our lives and that presents us with a real opportunity. If we feel we are in

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/a-first-for-christendom-holy-week-without-church>

mourning, are we mourning the right things, or do we simply want to go back to what we were before the crisis?

When Mary recognises Christ, Christ says to her "Do not hold on to me." This is the great Noli Me Tangere moment seen in the Fra Angelico painting above. Mary upon seeing Christ again assumes he is as he was before, but Christ tells her otherwise. If as we gaze upon the empty Churches, we simply long for the world to be as it was before, we are perhaps missing something. What I think we are being called to as a Church at this time, is to open ourselves up to Christ. We have more time on our hands, which we can dedicate to our Lord in prayer. We have more time assessing what is of real value in our lives, and what is not. I am sceptical of the online provision of services, simply because I think they are a poor substitute for prayer, and anything that encourages more time in front of a screen is not good for anyone's wellbeing. It seems too much like the Church trying to carry on as before. What we need to do instead, is to seek to live differently. To look upon the empty Church and see it for what it is, a symbol of hope in the resurrection.

Christ is bigger than the Church, his love for creation is bigger than the narrowness of our own vision of him. What we therefore, I think, are being called to do is to gaze into the empty tomb, to look within ourselves and see where we are being called to by Christ. To see where the empty tomb is leading us at this time. Not to business as usual, but to a transformed reality where we live solely by the light of Christ. A reality where we see and value the world around us for what it is as God's created order redeemed and restored through the resurrection.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.