

John 20. 1-18
Easter Sermon
St Albans Abbey, 21 April 2019

As Easter comes around yet again, we've been treated to the usual spate of articles in the media questioning belief in the resurrection of Christ. What makes the newspaper headlines so ironic is that a couple of weeks ago scientists finally managed to photograph a black hole. Pictures were plastered everywhere in the media.

I looked hard at the photographs and one thing was very clear: I couldn't see any black hole (which is not surprising because by definition no light can escape from one).

What the photographs do reveal is where a black hole is to be found in the universe. It locates it by revealing the so-called 'accretion disc' – a superheated cloud of gas and cosmic dust spinning around what scientists call the 'event horizon', and this disc releases vast amounts of electromagnetic radiation into space.

In other words, you can't see a black hole. What we see is the effect it causes: a bright ring of light.

When one theoretical physicist was asked what would happen if you went into a black hole he said you would probably be annihilated, although he pointed out that some of his colleagues think it might be the doorway into another place or form of existence, a so-called 'wormhole' in the universe.

When pushed on what was at the centre of a black hole he replied with great confidence and without a moment's hesitation that it is a 'singularity', the word physicists apparently use for something that they don't understand. 'We are still trying to make sense of what we've observed,' he said.

It's exciting to be living in an age when rapid progress is being made in science, technology and medicine. But what I find fascinating is the way that some scientists are perfectly happy to make incredibly audacious claims about something that no one can see or ever will be able to see, and which can only be inferred from the effects that it causes. It seems that they are quite capable of living with mysterious realities they can't explain, some of which contradict existing scientific theories, and then to stretch human language so far that it is difficult to understand what it all means.

Well, on this Easter Sunday morning I can think of another instance where we find a group of people gazing into a dark hole and trying to make sense of it. They were peering into an empty tomb. They couldn't be sure what had happened but within hours they began piecing together the evidence and stretching human language to breaking point in the process. As the different pieces of the jigsaw came together, they came to the extraordinary conclusion that God had raised the crucified Jesus from the dead.

- Each of the four gospels recount the events of Easter slightly differently which is exactly what you would expect coming from independent witnesses.
- We learn from one of the evangelists that the Roman authorities were so determined to squash the Jesus movement that they posted guards at the tomb to deter body snatchers. Yet the body was gone.
- All of the gospel writers tell us that the only things left in the empty tomb were the grave clothes, lying exactly as if the body had been removed from them.
- Various people, independently, begin to claim with breathless excitement that they had seen Jesus alive and that he bears the scars of crucifixion on his hands, feet and side.

St John, whose account we heard this morning, gives us a very particular slant in his account. He tells us that the resurrection took place 'on the first day' of the week while it was still dark. John is the only gospel to tell us that when Mary Magdalene sees the risen Christ as dawn breaks she thinks he is a gardener. His appearance has indeed changed, but the voice was the same. The resurrection speaks of a new form of life: there is continuity, but above all transformation.

For any Jewish person, steeped in the scriptures, John's description would have resonated with the story of creation as told in the opening chapters of Genesis which starts with the first day when 'darkness covered the face of the earth' and God says 'Let there be light'. It is in Genesis that we encounter another gardener – Adam, who is placed in the Garden of Eden to tend it.

John is telling us that in Christ there is a new creation. Here indeed is the second Adam, inviting us to be transformed and to share in his risen life. That is the message and hope of Easter that extends to every generation.

Small wonder that within a few days the small scattered band of disciples who had fled the scene of Jesus's execution in terror are now standing on the street corners in Jerusalem in full view of the Roman and Jewish authorities, preaching with confidence that God had raised Jesus from the dead.

Today, 2000 years later, there are 2.3 billion people in the world who are proud to call themselves Jesus's followers. The risen Christ has a bigger following than anyone on Twitter. And it is why we gather here on this Easter Day in celebration.

Like the theoretical physicists puzzling over the black holes in the universe, we Christians are still trying to make complete sense of the event of the resurrection - what we observe and experience - and the God who summons to glory. Like the scientists, what we see and marvel at is the effect that the risen Christ has on people and situations. Christ scatters the darkness and suffuses everything with light. And it is that invitation to personal transformation that he extends to you and me.

So let alleluia be our song today.

The Lord is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia.