Easter Day 2010 Iffley

I think I told some of you last year a story that sums up for me the kinds of questions that Easter raises in many people's minds. Dorothee Soelle, who was a delightful and radical theologian, now, sadly no longer with us, was once rung up by a journalist doing a piece on Easter. 'Did Jesus really rise from the dead?' he asked. Most church people just talk round it he said. But that was not what he wanted. People need to know. Did Jesus rise on Easter morning or was the whole thing just a fairy tale?

Soelle paused and then asked a question in response. What would change for you, she said, if the answer were yes or no? Astonished silence at the other end of the phone. The question of course has been asked for two thousand years. And, while I would always want to give an answer that was an emphatic Yes, as she went on to do, Soelle is right: there is never going to be any concrete proof of the fact.

But, the question of 'What difference? What are the consequences of this unprovable fact?' is much more to the point. And it is that kind of question that today's Gospel seems to be written to answer.

It is a wonderful story, and as always in this Gospel, below the surface are the key ideas that the writer wants us to grasp about the Christian faith. There is first the cross, of which the borrowed tomb reminds us. Jesus died, and what is more he died the death of a common criminal. And those who come to the grave bear the burden of their fear and their desertion of him. We can't separate all that from the resurrection. And that betrayal and death itself points to a set of ideas that have a long history, spelt out on every page of the Old Testament. The loss of Eden, the slaves escaping from Egypt, a kingdom lost. The history of Israel is not different from all our histories. We are not free. We squander possibilities, and we destroy those who would enable us to be free, adding to our burden of guilt and shame. But the story of Jesus is the story of someone who had no part in that, who embodied hope, daring to live by it because he put his faith in the profound mystery of God that had always guided his life. In doing so, it was as if he showed us a restored humanity, life as it might be lived by all of us. He took that hope and trust in God, which were the centre of his life, right into the jaws of death, living it to his last breath.

John is now unfolding the story of the consequences of that death. It is the story of healed memories and new possibilities for living. The disciples who stumble into the empty tomb go on to experience a profound love and forgiveness. From then on the emptiness of the tomb speaks of the emptiness and powerlessness of human fears. And this startling presence of Jesus in the Garden suggests that everything he represented in his lifetime continues to be with us – indeed it appears to

be on offer to all of us if we accept his way. The God who held him through death will hold us too – "My God and your God", he says. That offer opens up new the possibilities. John's Easter morning in the garden is the freshness of an entirely new beginning .

So the healing of memories and the consequent transfiguration of the past is one part of the difference. But to grasp it we have to understand that the way we look at the world has to change.

The one we need to look at here is Mary Magdalene. Mary represents the persistence of our inner self – of hope and the longing to love and be loved. But also something else. In the ancient world the witness of women was never trusted. They could not give evidence in law courts, people wrote books about their unreliability. But John, like Mark and Matthew – though unlike Luke and Paul – chooses to say that Jesus rose from the dead and we can believe it because a woman saw him. What is more, a woman is given the task of telling other people. I can think of no more striking way of saying - in the ancient world and perhaps even in ours – if you want to understand the resurrection: forget power. Forget dominance. Forget all that, and trust what appears to be weakness – indeed put your faith in apparent weakness - and you will see how life really is and can be lived.

I spent Lent rereading the Diaries of Etty Hillesum* – that remarkable Jewish woman who perished in Auschwitz. She came to the Christian faith, not through the Christian Church (I don't think she ever attended a church or even a synagogue) but through prayer and reading the bible, encouraged by her psychotherapist. The God she came to know and understand was not a God of power, but a God who she constantly referred to as "weak in this world" – a God indeed who she saw as needing to be "looked after" in this world. Etty knew all about power and where it leads. Her job was to help women and children into the cattle trucks that would take them to their deaths. And she knew that one day she would be there too. It was inconceivable that God would have any association with power, never would use the terms of this world. Bit by bit, her life was stripped down, and in that stripping, she found something quite unexpected. In accepting frailty, and the inevitability of death, Etty discovered that her eyes become more and more open to a deeper truth – indeed to the Truth of God and life itself. She came to understand the paradox, to which Jesus often returned, with his teaching about the cross and the dying seed, and which is at the heart of knowing the resurrection. She says "By excluding death from our life, we cannot live a full life, and by admitting death into our life, we enlarge and enrich it. I am ready for everything, for anywhere on this earth, wherever God may send me, and I am ready to bear witness in any situation and unto death, that life is beautiful and meaningful." She never lost that sense of

life as a wonderful gift, despite her terrible circumstances, and along with it came an extraordinary capacity for forgiveness.

That holding together of frailty and death, and knowing, with a gut like knowing, the certainty and joy of hope and life, *is* the resurrection life. Where else are we look for resurrection and the restoration of our humanity, but in our weakness? We all of us know about crippling fear, and hurts and wounds that never seem to ease, and anxieties that never seem to leave us. Nor is it just us. I sensed, as I listened to that powerful setting of the Passion in last Tuesday's concert, the line of connection that lies between Calvary and the fears we all knew as we sat listening in that chapel, and a world of suffering in Gaza, Haiti, Afghanistan and many other places. Both here and there we long for redemption and the healing of memory. Only within flawed flesh does redemption happen. And only when we acknowledge that frailty – as Mary did in the garden - can hurt to be met by healing, and grace and forgiveness embrace human wrong doing.
Resurrection means that Jesus died, but God continues. Out of the shattered life of Jesus a new thing is being done – for all of us. God has walked through the dark places of our lives and conquered. The grave of our fears, John says, has become a place of light. The darkness is rolled back, and in the new morning, there is a joy that comes from nowhere that nothing can take away.

* I read: Etty Hillesum, Essential Writings, in the Modern Spiritual Masters Series, published by Orbis. The selection and introduction is by Annemarie Kidder, and is particularly good. The series also includes a similar selection from Dorothee Soelle by Dianne L Oliver.