



Mary Magdalene in the Garden by Sieger Köder

“While it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb” Jn 20.1a

The night is at its darkest just before the dawn, they say. And this is the very moment when, in St John’s Gospel, Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb. John’s phrase “while it was still dark”, underlines the darkness of Mary’s desolation: a man she loves deeply has been brutally killed and she has come to tend his mutilated body.

By the time she has found the tomb’s broken opening and discovered the devastating fact that Jesus’ body has gone, the sun is beginning to rise. (Is this the moment captured by Köder in his painting? Certainly, he streaks the Jerusalem sky with reds and oranges and tinges the clouds with pink.) Mary runs to Peter and John and breathlessly shares the shocking news. The three return to the tomb together, the two men going right in and finding the linen wrappings. And then dazed and still hardly daring to believe, Peter and John go home again.

But Mary stayed. Emboldened by love she stands her ground, weeping, at the place of death. And then she bends down to look into the tomb herself. And she sees angels. “They have taken away my Lord,” she wails, and then turns round and sees ... the gardener? (So perhaps this, then, is the moment captured in the painting?) The conversation Mary has with him changes everything – not just for her but for everyone, everywhere.

What do we see as we gaze at this painting in the context of coronavirus?

We see a human life as fractured as the gravestones by which she kneels. We see in Mary’s face and body the same grief and confusion and trauma as that created by COVID-19.

But we also see afresh that “in getting down and looking into the black places of our lives, we, too, sometimes find angels” (Ward and Wild, *Human Rites* 1995) and that it is *because* she remains steadfastly there by the empty tomb that Mary encounters the risen Christ...

“To believe in the risen Jesus is to trust that the transformational power of God is active in the human world, available and relevant to every situation.”

Rowan Williams

Prayer

**Risen Jesus,
embolden those who weep
to look for you in the darkness
and to glimpse there
the Light of your new dawn. Amen**



Noli me Tangere by Titian

“Do not hold on to me” Jn 20.15a

The Queen is one of many to have made a connection between our current crisis and WW11. As she spoke to us on Palm Sunday during a global pandemic, she looked back to her very first broadcast in 1940 during which she and her sister spoke to children evacuated from their homes during a world war.

At the outset of that war, all the National Gallery's paintings were sent to Wales and stored safely in a disused slate mine. But during a particularly bleak moment, the gallery's director, Kenneth Clark, decided that one picture a month should be brought back to London and displayed. The first to be requested by the public and to hang in solitary splendour was this one by Titian (left). It would be fascinating to travel back in time and hear what the painting meant to those ten thousand people who, having just lived through the Blitz, chose to go and see it during the February of 1942.

What do we see as we gaze at this painting in the context of coronavirus?

A weeping woman has just begged a 'gardener' for help in finding Jesus' body. He only needs to use one word in response - "Mary!" - and Titian captures the second afterwards. *Now* she sees him for who he is and reaches out with joy. But "Don't touch me", he says, indicating that because of the cross (look at the various vertical and horizontal lines centre stage), things can never be the same again.

Refraining from touching those we love is part of our response to COVID-19 and many are suggesting that *our* lives will never be the same again, even when the danger lessens and a vaccine is created. But if that feels sad and scary, we need to look at the painting again: the brown earthiness of the world in which Mary kneels contrasts with the green idyll in which Jesus stands, a bright, fresh world fertile with the possibilities of resurrection. A new future dawns in the painting for Mary and for the whole world.

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Rowan Williams

Prayer

Risen Jesus

**you call us each by name
and we are yours:
though we cannot touch you,
hold on to us
leading us through loss and lament
to the Easter we long for. Amen**

EASTER WEDNESDAY

The Harling Christ by Maz Jackson



“To believe in the risen Jesus is to trust that the transformational power of God is active in the human world, available and relevant to every situation.”

Rowan Williams

Prayer

Risen Jesus,
we place along your outstretched arms
the ill and dying and bereaved,
the isolated and anxious,
the traumatised and exhausted:
undergird them all, we pray,
and bring your risen gold
into the wounds they carry. Amen

... all will be made alive in Christ. 1 Cor 15.22b

Pay a visit to the parish church in East Harling, South Norfolk, and you will come across the vibrantly colourful painting pictured here. It's by the Norfolk artist Maz Jackson and was dedicated in 2012. Like so many in Norfolk, St Peter and St Paul East Harling is a 'wool' church, built from the wealth of the trade around it. The little lamb in the basket brings this mediaeval past to mind but the way it looks up at the central Christ-figure also makes us think of "The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world", that round green world on which the basket is set.

St Peter (left) and St Paul (right), standing on the spring grass, also look up at the dazzling figure of Jesus, and all the way along his wide-spread arms stand other disciples – St Andrew is particularly easy to identify, the saltire cross of his martyrdom behind him.

What do we see as we gaze at this painting in the context of coronavirus?

Though the painting is joyous and pulses with life, each palm of Jesus' huge outstretched hands bears a horrific hole. There has clearly been terrible suffering. Gleaming discs, however, now fill these holes: brutal nails have turned to gold. And the arms of the crucified and risen one go on and on, endless in their capacity to carry others in their own terrible trials.

The lovely thing about the lamb, the squirrel (the heraldic emblem of East Harling's Lord of the Manor) and the basket made of Norfolk rush is that it brings the Resurrection right into our region. But at the same time as this Christ is intensely local, he also encompasses nothing less than the whole globe on which he stands. During this pandemic, his arms are long enough, strong enough to undergird those in the slums of India, or the refugee camps of Gaza or the lonely cities of Lombardy...



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Rowan Williams

Prayer
Risen Jesus,
slip alongside
the broken-hearted
and mend them
with the bright thread
of your love. Amen

Then their eyes were opened and they recognised him Luke 24. 31a

The Emmaus narrative (Lk 24. 13-35) has brokenness at its very heart. At the story's beginning, Luke shows us two broken human beings. It's the afternoon of the first Easter Day and they are walking home from Jerusalem. They are broken by the trauma of Jesus' execution, by grief and by bitter disappointment. As they walk, a stranger falls in with them, tuning into their brokenness. Then comes the breaking open of the scriptures, Jesus teaching them that a broken Messiah was the only way. And they invite him to share supper with them at their home...

Jesus breaks bread and blesses it and shares it with them and it is at the very moment when he tears it in two that the penny drops and they realise who he is. In Emmaus, as at the Last Supper, the meaning of the broken loaf and Jesus' broken body are mysteriously intertwined. "Do this to remember me", he'd said a few nights before. "Watch while bread is broken, share the fragments, find me in this."

Today's image is an example of kintsugi, a Japanese art form which works with broken pottery. A lacquer mixed with powdered gold fuses the fragments together, drawing luminous attention to both the break and the repair, a bright thread of something new holding the broken parts together, restoring and recreating.

What do we see as we gaze at this ceramic in the context of coronavirus at Easter?

Perhaps we see the widespread fragmentation ushered in by the virus, dangerous fissures in our economy, infrastructures and society. Perhaps we see a health system stretched to breaking point, fractured family and friendship groups, the broken spirits of the bereaved.

But we also see that for the risen Christ, nothing is beyond repair. Like a golden stream of liquid lacquer, he will quietly, mostly unacknowledged, be holding together the broken fragments of our world, at work in the long, painful, holy, process of restoration and recreation.



Resurrection sculpted by Benedictine nuns at Schotenhof, Belgium

“He is not here: he has been raised” Mt 28.6a

Take a moment to look at this sculpture made by Belgian nuns... We see two Roman guards in their boots and helmets and chain-mail, sitting at either end of a stone grave slab, scratching their chins in disbelief, looking at where the body was and now is not. Carved into the bronze above them is a spiralling disc, rays emanating from it in all directions. And cut into the disc and its rays is the unmistakable shape of a figure, head up, arms outstretched. But it is nothing but an *outline* against the bluest of blue skies. There is no actual figure, only the space where it has been and a wonderful sense of freedom.

This sculpture teaches us something very profound: we cannot look *at* Jesus’ raised body but we must somehow understand the world *through* it. The resurrection, says this sculpture, must be our viewfinder, through which we see everything else. In all four resurrection narratives, Jesus is constantly saying, “Don’t hang on to me now but go on, go ahead...” For the disciples, everything changes with the resurrection. They must start looking at Jesus, at themselves, at their lives and the future in new ways.

What do we see as we gaze at this sculpture in the context of coronavirus?

In rising from the dead, Jesus gives us not only the Christian hope that death is not the end. He also gives us a new world *now* full of the possibility

of resurrection. He offers us our earthly lives transfigured by hope. Through the lens of his new risen life, everything looks different. Death, despair, disappointment, though still devastating, no longer have the last word.

How might the frustrations and domestic tensions of lockdown be transfigured by looking at them through the viewfinder of Jesus’ new risen life? And what about illness and trauma and bereavement? The sharpened sense of our own mortality? And the markedly changed world in which our future lies?

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Rowan Williams

Prayer

Risen Jesus,
in our distress,
give us the grace
to welcome hope
and search for the shape
of resurrection. Amen