

Today we read Matthew's first mention of the actual encounter with Jesus risen from the dead. You will perhaps remember the Lukan story at the vigil, about Mary Magdalen and two other women visiting the tomb and meeting an angel, followed by the story of Peter going to the tomb and finding the shroud. Then at the Mass of Easter Day we read the account in John of Mary Magdalen visiting the tomb and finding it empty, and of Peter and the Beloved Disciple running together: they enter the tomb and see the burial cloths, and the Beloved Disciple believes.

So we have had all the principal liturgies of Easter *without* reading an account of any meeting with the risen Christ. This impressive fact must give us plenty to think about; the Church very much values the state of faith of the first disciples, the witnesses of Christ. Far from being a crude survival story, where Jesus springs back into his old life like Jerry the mouse after being marmellised by Tom the cat. It is a delicate account of infinite complexity. The Jesus the disciples meet is not immediately identified; he is the gardener, they are not sure about him, they think they are seeing a ghost, they walk seven miles with him without knowing who he is. Nor does he appear in public: he appears to no-one who did not previously believe in him. The resurrection-experience is not self-generated, or a dream, or wishful thinking: no-one is in the least expecting it, and the overwhelming emotion described is one of *shock*.

So we can say that the encounter is a real encounter, where people have the presence of the Risen One almost forced upon them. Yet there is a process of acceptance on the part of each of them, which is more important than any description of the sight or sound of him. That is why we have spent Easter Day with the disciples and at the tomb.

It also accounts for the difficulties we find in making images of the Resurrection. It simply won't do crudely to depict a man climbing out of a grave. The life he lives now is not subject to that level of human struggle; in the glorified body he would no more have to climb out of a grave than he would contract toothache or stub his glorified toe. Yet the freedom of the risen Lord to engage the world where we still do stub our toes or eat fish or die under persecution is proved again and again by the personal experience of believers. He can encounter us; but we cannot command the mode of being in which his life is now utterly free of the limitation we know. So today, alongside the women's ecstatic recognition of the divinity of their Lord, we find the unbelieving Sanhedrin closing ranks to manage the situation according to the world's rules; and it is between these two opposite poles that the Christian life has been lived.