

Evensong, Jesus College Oxford, Sunday 26 April 2015, 5.45pm

...Real Life

Ps 98

Ezek 37:1-14

Mark 16:1-8

In nomine...

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!

He is Risen indeed! Alleluia!

Reality TV shows, I might dare to say, are something of a misnomer. I know this since my research tells me that I ended up watching one fairly recently. I attended my mother's low-key birthday party – which after just an hour was so low-key that the only two people well enough to celebrate it were my sister-in-law and me – so somehow Tina and I ended up drinking quite a lot of pink champagne, eating a Chinese takeaway large enough for six, and watching Mission Survive. As you do. All in my mother's honour. I think she herself was probably in bed by then.

Anyway, Mission Survive, I am reliably informed, is a Reality TV show. Or at least it was until Vogue Williams won it.

But it's not a very broad representation of reality. I imagine neither you nor I will ever end up trying to survive in various jungle habitats with a TV crew and a survival *meister* on hand.

So what is reality? What is it to be real?

Well, my Mum's birthday celebration was very real. There was illness, anxiety, and a very real sense of relief that we all survived it; but there was also fun and laughter, food and celebration, and a baby niece in the middle of it all. Human life in all its fullness.

And that's the kind of reality that is not just my own reality. I would say you could easily imagine the situation... but perhaps not. But that non-party was a reality, embracing struggles and joy, weakness and hope. Realities that we can all – and do all - experience.

Now – let me take you back to Ezekiel 37. Really? I mean, dead bones living? Turning into live, real, human beings? Apocalyptic visions, gory, physical, tactile images. Doesn't that stretch our imagination? Well, yes.

But to say something is *unimaginable* often means we know it's real but we can't get our heads round it. It's like saying "*un-real!*" It is to say "I know this is real but my head's just not quite caught up with my experiences..."

So Ezekiel is both real but unreal. Rattling noise, bones coming together, tendons and flesh and skin wrapping around them, and breath coming within them. He appeals to all our senses – but it's not an easily imagined experience.

Let's turn to the Gospel of Mark. Probably the earliest Gospel, Mark helps us uncover the bare bones of the Easter story. Which is this: There are three women. They go to the tomb. It's empty. They see a young man there. He seems to be in the know. He reassures them and tells them that the emptiness is real, and why. And they are terrified and run away.

Mark is leading us to the truth through a simple account that is oddly easy to imagine. He takes us by the hand and shows us the reality.

Take it bit by bit. Three women. Well, that seems real. Remember, they're in a male-dominated society. So if this was made up, these first witnesses would be men. And even the way they are named – described according to their male relatives – is real.

They want to care for the body. Real. If someone close to you has just died, you want to care for their body in death as in life. The women wanted to give him the best they could. They wanted to go to the tomb, the physical place where they assumed he was. Utterly imaginable.

The large stone is rolled back. Well, that would bring about both relief – that at least that’s not their problem - and perplexity: who did this, who got there first? The obvious step is to carry on into the tomb. Wondering who’s there.

So it’s unsurprising that they find someone there. It’s just a young man – very ordinary – dressed in white – perhaps a bit less ordinary. But notice this: Mark doesn’t dress all this up. This is just a young man. Mark doesn’t describe this as an angel, a heavenly vision, something to amaze. He is trying to make it simple for us. Helping us grope towards the reality.

Of course the women are alarmed. Who is this? Someone strong enough to move that stone – they are vulnerable. That all smacks of reality too. And how obvious is the man’s response? “Don’t be alarmed” – he sees their fear, and he wants them to know he is not going to harm them.

And now he gives them a hint of his authority. He knows what’s been going on. He knows what they’re doing. And he speaks of it oh so simply. “You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene” (very grounded language again) “who was crucified”. He’s in the know.

The next message takes a bit more emphasis. “He has risen!” Naturally that needs backing up. Why should they believe him? “He is not here, look there is the place where they laid him.” Reality check. Experience it for yourself. Look at, touch the empty slab. You can see the absence, feel the emptiness.

Well, *obviously* they run. Wouldn’t you? They’re terrified. Their very sense of unreality is very real. Mark is uncovering the reality little by little. He’s trying to make the reality as easy for us as possible.

The Gospel ends there in the earliest manuscripts. And why shouldn’t it? The women don’t say anything. Well, of course they don’t, not straight away. They need to go and get their heads round it. Figure out what to do next. They’re all afraid, women and men together. No surprise, Jesus was branded a state criminal. We’d all have run, kept our thoughts to ourselves until we summoned up the confidence to share them. *But the Gospel exists.* The

women clearly did say something. The story spread. Little by little the news got out and was experienced as reality.

The other thing is that Mark doesn't actually have an appearance of the risen Jesus. Well, why should he? This, the earliest of the Gospels stops at the earliest post-Easter point. The rest of the New Testament takes the story on. The rest of the disciples take the story on. And Jesus takes the story on. There are numerous references elsewhere to experiences, many sightings of the risen Jesus.¹ In fact, it makes more sense if *Mark* leaves such episodes out – because he's the Evangelist who helps his readers take in the story, believe, and make the reality of the empty tomb their own reality.

Mark makes Jesus' reality our reality. We have no difficulties seeing the reality of the Passion narratives – suffering, oppression, injustice and death are sadly all too commonplace in our world. The university students in Kenya. The plane crash in the Alps. The migrants drowning in their desperation to get out of Africa and into Italy. We know this is the real world.

But we also know the other side of it: That a world with only death and suffering is unsurvivable. That a world where there is no hope is a world without existence. That a world where Jesus has died and Love is dead is not a world, frankly, where anyone would like to live. And we have experienced also the reality of friendship, love, joy, and peace. It may not be the whole reality of our experience – but neither is suffering and death the whole reality of our experience. Reality involves both death and life, suffering and hope.

So what is real life? It is not just the world outside the Oxford bubble - you're experiencing reality here too. But it is living in the light of the reality of the empty tomb. It is letting the reality of Death not having the last word, the reality of Life regained, the reality of Love unconquered, be *your* reality. With Mark, invite the world to make that reality real, everywhere and always.

Reality check. Live it, experience it, for yourselves.

¹ E.g. Acts 10:34-43

