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Hello and welcome to this episode of the St. Andrew's Enfield podcast with me, Steve Griffiths.

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As I record this, we're in Holy Week 2019. We're waiting for Easter Sunday and it's such a beautiful liturgical season, isn't it? When the absolute focus of the Gospel, the death and the resurrection of Jesus, fills our thinking and our practice of worship. And in this podcast, I want us to spend a bit of time together thinking about the resurrection of Jesus and the way in which John tells the story in his Gospel in Chapter 20:1-18. And the way he tells the story is a sort of metaphor of the journey into Christian discipleship into which we are all called. And the way that John tells the story, as we'd expect from John, is a little bit different from the other three gospel writers. And he uses the story, I think, to tell us something about our own journey into God. Uh, the resurrection story as told by John is, in part at least, the story of our own growth as Christians. So let's, uh, let's delve into the story of the resurrection and see what we have to learn about our own walk,

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God.

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Graveyards are strange places, um, in that they bring up very different emotions for different people. For the recently bereaved, they can be places of grief and sadness. Um, but for the historian, there places of interest and data collection. For children, they can be really good playgrounds, great for hide and seek. Graveyards bring up a range of emotions in us depending on our life experience. Well on that first Easter Sunday morning, Mary Magdalene had a mixture of emotions about graveyards. It was just a week beforehand that she'd been standing in another graveyard, the one where a tomb housed their friend Lazarus. Now that was one visit to a graveyard that she would never forget. Um, because Lazarus, if you remember, had been ill for a while. Mary and Martha, his sisters had called on Jesus to come and heal him. But if you remember, Jesus had sort of dallied on the way,

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he'd taken too long to arrive. By the time he got there, Lazarus was dead. And Mary and Martha were beside themselves with grief and they were really angry that Jesus hadn't responded any quicker, but they didn't know the incredible miracle that was about to happen. Uh, Jesus drew near to Lazarus's tomb and he called him out. And within a matter of minutes, their brother stood before them back from the dead. And Jesus had wowed the crowd by raising Lazarus from the dead. It was an incredible display of his authority and power. So the graveyard, um, was a good place to be that day. The graveyard was a place of victory. It was a place of miracles. It was a place of uncontained joy. But that was seven days ago and an awful lot can happen in seven days. The triumphal entry into Jerusalem had soon resulted in opposition.

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Uh, the crowd had turned, the mood had soured, and then the atrocities of Good Friday, uh, dealt a crushing blow to the hopes and the dreams of Mary and all her friends. And she's probably thinking, how could it all have gone so wrong? Um, had the last three years of being with Jesus been for nothing? What

about this brave new world that Jesus had promised when the, uh, least would become first? What about this new world order when the meek would inherit the earth? What about this promise of life in all its fullness? And all those words probably seemed to um, ring hollow for Mary now, as she stood in this other graveyard. Last week, she had been in a graveyard that spoke of her victory and joy and this week she was standing in a graveyard that spoke to her of um, defeat and loss, probably thinking, how could it all have gone so wrong?

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And so Mary moves towards the tomb of Jesus and grief is consuming her heart. And John reminds us of that in Verse one when he comments, "it was still dark." And the sunrise was yet to happen both physically and metaphorically. For Mary, in body and in soul, it was still dark. And she arrives at the tomb and to her horror, the stone has been removed. It's been lifted out of the groove in which it had been placed. And she was beside herself with fear and sadness. Uh, this was the final humiliation, the final betrayal by the authorities. Uh, what had Jesus done, um, that they should treat him with such lack of respect? It was more than enough to have him arrested and put on trial, um, more than enough to have him publicly flogged and tortured and certainly more than enough to have him crucified. But now it seems that the grave robbers have taken his body and who wouldn't bet their last denarius on the Roman authorities being behind this despicable act?

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So Mary runs off to tell Simon Peter and John the terrible news and she's convinced that Jesus' body has been mistreated in death just as badly as it happened in life. And then Simon Peter and John run to the tomb and John gets there first. He bends over and he peers inside, but he, he doesn't dare to go in. Then Simon Peter, um, by temperament of course, isn't quite so shy. He's always a man in a hurry. So he reaches the tomb and he goes straight inside and he sees the linen cloths which had been wrapped around Jesus' body. And for the first time, um, there's an indication that something very special had taken place because when Lazarus had been raised from the dead, um, he came out of the tomb, still wrapped in his linen cloths. But this scene, um, is now looking very different. The clothes are neatly folded. The napkin for the head is in a separate place. Uh, this is a, um, it's a a carefully laid out scene. It's designed to show the disciples and the followers that something unique has taken place. Lazarus had been resuscitated, but Jesus has been resurrected and the two events are quite different. And grasping that point that Jesus was not merely resuscitated, but he was resurrected, is at the very heart of the Easter story and what we believe as Christians.

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The whole of the Easter message, the whole of the Christian Gospel, hinges on the fact that Jesus has been raised from the dead. And John stresses that point here because, in the next verse, John says of himself in the third person, as he often used to do, he said, "He saw and believed". And I think there's something really profound about this comment, which takes us to the very heart of the passage in terms of our own discipleship. Um, John is confronted by an empty tomb and he sees and believes. He doesn't even have to see the risen Christ to believe. The empty tomb is enough. And I think that's a key point for all of us as

Christians, that the empty tomb is enough. The empty tomb is the basis of our faith. We don't need to see, um, great miracles to believe. Uh, we don't need to have profound answers to prayer to believe. We don't need writing in the sky or a vision of Jesus to believe. The empty tomb is enough. The empty tomb is the greatest miracle of all. It's the most profound answer to humanity's deepest question. Uh, the empty tomb is God's message to us, and it's enough. "He saw and believed." As we now go on to think about our own walk with God in the light of this passage, um, something really interesting emerges when we consider the word 'saw' or 'to see' that John uses here.

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So what is it about this word to see that is so special in John's version of the resurrection story? Well, in Verse five, we read that John bent over, he looked in, and he saw the strips of linen. And the Greek word used for 'saw' has to do with the eye - to physically see. But in Verse six, we read that Peter went into the tomb and saw the strips of linen. But the Greek word used for 'saw' in this verse is a different word and it has more to do with, um, contemplating an event. And then in Verse eight, we read that, "he saw and believed". And now a third Greek word for 'saw' is used, which has more to do with spiritual insight and understanding. And so in these three verses, um, John uses one idea - 'to see' - and he uses three different Greek words for that action to describe the spiritual journey that each one of us goes on in the light of the empty tomb of Jesus. Um, we see the facts, we contemplate the facts and we understand the spiritual implication of those facts. The journey of faith into which we are all called through this Easter story is one in which, uh, we, we see, we contemplate and we understand. There's a definite journey here. There's a, there's a movement of faith that sort of defines how we grow in our relationship with God. We see, we contemplate, we understand.

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As we go through this process of seeing, contemplating and understanding, it would be, um, wrong to suggest that the empty tomb somehow gets rid of all our doubts; that the empty tomb makes it easy for us to believe. Of course, it doesn't. All of us continue to have doubts. We continue to wrestle with a poor understanding about God. And that's exactly what we see in this Easter story. The disciples leave the tomb and they go back to where they come from, with confusion, uh, running through their minds. And Mary is left alone at the tomb. She's left alone to weep and to mourn her loss. Uh, Mary stays behind and in her grief bends over and peers inside, presumably to see if it really is true or not. And what she sees shocks the life out of her. Now there are two angels in white seated where Jesus' had been laid.

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I mean, how much more weird can her day become? And they ask her a simple question. They say, "Woman, why are you weeping?" And as soon as she answers, she turns around and sees Jesus standing there. But she doesn't recognize him. And he asks her the same question, but he also adds a vital second question. Jesus says, "Woman, why are you weeping? Who is it you seek?" Now, what a profound question is that! Perhaps the same question could be asked of each one of us. Why do we bother engaging with the Christian faith? Who is it you seek? And as Jesus asks here this question, um, she thinks

he's the gardener and her utter devotion to her beloved Lord shines through. In her response she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you've put him and I will get him." Mary, um, never pauses to think about how she's going to move the corpse of a full grown man. She just wants to do what is right by Jesus because she loves him so much. And in response to this overwhelming sign of devotion, Jesus reveals his identity to her, and there's, uh, a real intimacy in this moment. He just says, "Mary." When Jesus reveals himself to us, uh, he calls us by name. We hear Jesus call us by name and it's enough. So who do you seek? You seek the Messiah who calls you by name.

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And then Jesus gives Mary a command. He says, "Do not hold on to me." Now, some have taken this to mean that Mary isn't allowed to touch the resurrected body of Jesus. But I'm not sure it actually means that at all because the tense in the original Greek that Jesus uses here suggests a repeated or continuous action. So I think he's speaking metaphorically to Mary and to us. It's almost as if he's saying, "Don't cling on to Jesus of Nazareth". Uh, don't think that the earthly story of Jesus is all there is to it. It's amazing how many people do that. How many people revere the earthly Jesus as if he were a good man or a fine prophet or a wonderful moral example to us all? Now, he was all of those things, but he was much more than that. He still is much more than that, and we are not to cling on to our ideas of the earthly Jesus.

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We've got to allow him to ascend to the Father. And he has to ascend to the Father so that the story can be completed. Because once Jesus ascends to the Father in heaven, then the Holy Spirit can be sent and then eventually Jesus can return in judgment and salvation. So Mary runs to the disciples with the news and she shouts out to them, she says, "I have seen the Lord." And surprise, surprise, a fourth Greek word is used here, um, meaning 'to see'. And the tense used implies that 'the seeing' will have ongoing implications for her future. So this passage then takes us on a spiritual journey, a journey through which we see more and more clearly. Firstly, we see the physical evidence of the empty tomb. Secondly, we contemplate the evidence of the empty tomb. Thirdly, we develop spiritual understanding and insight about the resurrection. And then finally we see the implications of that for our future lives.

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Jesus says to Mary, "Who do you seek?" And Jesus says to each one of us today, "Who do you seek? What do you see? Have you grasped the implications of the resurrection for your own life? Where are you at on the journey of faith? Have you seen? Have you contemplated? Have you understood?" And if you have, then complete the Easter story in your own life and grasp the implications of the resurrected Christ for you. Because the resurrected Christ, um, brings us forgiveness. The resurrected Christ brings us wholeness and healing. The resurrected Christ brings us a new identity and fullness of life. So the Easter story is not one to be somehow confined to the history books. It's a living experience for each one of us as we learn to truly see who Christ is and the impact he can have on our lives. Who do you seek? Who do you see? Well, in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus simply said, "Seek and you will find."

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So I hope that you've found this a useful approach to the resurrection story as told in John's Gospel and that through this, you can think a bit more deeply about what it means to be a disciple of Jesus; to see, to contemplate, to understand, and then to allow the resurrection story to shape the rest of your life. If you've got any questions or comments, then please do contact me by email - steve.griffiths@london.anglican.org. Uh, check out the church website standrewsenfield.com and our Facebook page is St Andrews Enfield. Uh, don't forget to subscribe to these podcasts and please tell other people about them as well so that we can grow as a learning community together. And wherever you are, whatever you're doing today, I hope that you will know the joy of the risen Christ in your heart and that you will know God presence with you. So wherever you are, have a great day. Bye.