



The Church of England
in Essex and East London
Diocese of Chelmsford

Easter Day

Sunday 5 April 2026

Reading: John 20. 1-18

The Rt Rev'd Dr Guli Francis-Dehqani

The Bishop of Chelmsford

I've struggled a little to prepare my Easter sermon this year, mindful of world events and my own investment in the ongoing situation in Iran and the Middle East. There are grave short term concerns for the people who live in countries affected and especially for Christian communities, in Iran, in Palestine and elsewhere. But there are also longer term worries about what's going to happen when the bombs and the drones and the missiles finally stop doing their worst. How will the people of Iran fare when the regime turns its full brutal attention once more to cracking down on dissenters? Will the Palestinians and Israeli's ever broker a peace that brings justice for all?

I was very struck by a reflection piece written in the last few weeks by Sara Afshari, a Persian friend of mine and a theologian of considerable depth. She was writing about the bible verse that follows on immediately after the Gospel reading we heard today. Verse 19 of

John 20 has the disciples, who've heard Mary's account of the resurrection, hiding behind locked doors for fear. Afshari's article is a meditation on faith behind locked doors, where there is fear and uncertainty all around.

For the disciples all those years ago, it was fear of the Jewish authorities. Today for Christians in Iran, it is the fear of those for whom faith has been shaped by a long history of struggling to live carefully and cautiously under prolonged authoritarian rule. There are those in small cell groups who meet covertly in one another's homes, frightened of the very real possibility of being discovered, and there are those who've been arrested and are incarcerated behind the locked doors of prison cells, interrogated, tortured, some even executed.

And yet, against this backdrop, Easter Day has dawned once more and it is my duty and my joy to proclaim the risen Lord. So I invite you now, together with Mary on that first Easter Day, who crept out courageously under the cover of darkness, I invite you to join me as we too step out in faith to greet the risen Lord.

In our Gospel account there is terror and confusion, weeping, uncertainty and misunderstanding. And yet all the while, Jesus was present, initially unrecognised and mistaken as the gardener by Mary who was overwhelmed and blinded by her own emotions. Then, as the disciples gathered fearfully in a locked room, Jesus came and stood amongst them, saying 'peace be with you'. And for Christians who live under repressive regimes in Iran and elsewhere, Jesus makes himself known in dreams and visions, through Scripture and in the quiet of their hearts, where no dictator can trespass. These encounters with the risen Christ are not the result of wishful thinking or hopeless sentimentality. They represent the power of resurrection life.

And just as Jesus was present to Mary, to the fearful disciples and to those who are persecuted today, so he is present in the mess and confusion, the fears and failures, the unfulfilled longings and tensions of our lives. You may not always notice or recognise him, but he is there, longing to be seen, calling you by your name, just as he did Mary in the garden outside the empty tomb.

BUT, the resurrection is not some shmaltzy romantic antidote to the realities of life. Mary, when she finally recognised Jesus wanted to embrace him, to keep him as he was, she wanted things to be safe and easy. But that is not the Christ she encounters. This Jesus bears the scars of crucifixion. 'Do not hold on to me', he says, before sending her away with a task to accomplish; to become part of the ongoing resurrection story herself. Still today, he doesn't take away the sorrows and the pain but meets us in their midst, giving courage and hope, calling us too to be part of the ongoing story of transformation until that time when the whole creation is swept up into the heart of God.

Sara Afshari in her article writes of signs of dignity and the little acts of defiance by those who are kept behind locked prison doors - handicrafts made with whatever materials they can get hold of which she describes as 'beauty defying constraint'.

And what of you and I?

If you have come to church to meet the risen Jesus, then beware, meeting him means being caught up in the ongoing resurrection story and being willing to play your part. Faith is not just about what we receive, for it demands a whole life response from us. A response that is more than mere words but requires our whole lives. In what ways might resurrection life be inviting you to become part of the transforming story, resisting the evils of this world, making a difference, repaying hate with love? And in what ways might resurrection life be inviting Christians collectively, the church, if you will, to be part of the transforming story?

Well, we must continue preaching of Jesus who is the prince of peace and the one who brings redemption in this life and the next. But what might that look like in the here and now? I believe that the urgent call for Christians in this country, at this time, is to be people of reconciliation, to be those who build good relationships with people of other faiths and all people of good will as a sign of resurrection life and hope, and as a sign of defiance in the face of global politics which threatens our common life. As Christians in the UK, we are safe to practice our faith but there are those in other religious communities, in particular Jews and Muslims, who do not currently feel safe in this country. We have seen a shocking rise in the number of antisemitic and Islamophobic attacks. Their fear is real and we must take it seriously.

We must not allow the hatred symbolised by these attacks to become normalised. We must speak against such violence and do so from the foundations of our faith which is an Easter faith, where love has overcome hate and death has been banished by new life.

But mere words are not enough.

That's why the misappropriation of Christian words and symbols by the far right nationalist movement is so abhorrent. Carrying a cross and calling for a return to Christianity means nothing when it's divorced from the actions that flow from the sacrificial events of Good Friday and Easter. The fruits of resurrection life are love, kindness, service, generosity, and these must propel us to build healthy interfaith relationships and cohesive communities. Celebration of differences can be an act of Easter resistance against the efforts to divide us. We must stand alongside people of all faiths and none, as a symbol of our common humanity and as a sign of our resurrection faith.

On that first Easter, Mary and the disciples were given a divine energy to go and make a difference. They discovered that resurrection is the beginning, not the end. It opens the way to renewal, redemption and reconciliation and as Christians we are called to witness to God's purpose for the whole of humanity.

So, let us go from this place as Easter people, ready to play our part in the ongoing story of transformation.