

I remember my very first visit to Jerusalem in 1983. My friend Tom and I had walked along the Via Dolorosa, through the meandering ancient streets of the old city, following the footsteps of Jesus on his last journey and arrived at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre where traditionally Jesus had been crucified and then laid in the rock tomb. We made our way down to the basement where in the gloom and surrounded by pilgrims and worshippers we came to the tomb. It was indeed a special place, but it was disappointing. It didn't capture what we imagined Jesus' tomb must really have been like, surrounded as it was by the chanting of priests, bells, mosaics and gold. We imagined being outside, in a garden and being shocked by an empty tomb, just like the two Marys, and experiencing the overwhelming presence of the risen Jesus.

So, that's why Tom and I along with many others made our way out of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre to a spot nearby where there was an outcrop of rock which looks like a skull, and in which there is a low square doorway with a large rolling stone standing to one side. At the Garden Tomb, as it is called, Tom and I sat on a bench looking at the tomb and now we could really imagine Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, Jesus' brothers, coming to the tomb to carry out the last of the burial rituals.

We could sense their amazement and astonishment on finding the stone rolled to one side to reveal an empty tomb. Matthew's Gospel explains that the stone had been moved by an earthquake, but for Tom and myself and countless Christians, the earthquake is not an actual earthquake but an inner spiritual realisation of the new life which Jesus makes possible.

What is extraordinary about this moment is that the spiritual tremors of Jesus' resurrection spread so rapidly and transformed the lives of so many so quickly. St Paul says that over 500 people had resurrection experiences all at once. Peter's sermon in the house of Cornelius captures something of the power of the resurrection earthquake, which cuts through all human differences – race, class and gender – with its message of peace which goes beyond all human comprehension.

Peace lies at the very heart of the Easter message. By peace I don't just mean a world without war, tyrannical rule, family strife – as much as these are of course desirable, but a deeper peace in oneself in which we find ourselves loved and valued by God. As Jesus said to his disciples, shortly before his death, 'Peace I leave you, my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives' (John 14:27).

The word in Hebrew for this deep spiritual peace is shalom. Shalom is often used as a greeting because shalom is what ultimately unites us with each other and God. St Paul especially used shalom when greeting his Christian readers at the start of his letters to sum up all his most heartfelt hopes for their Christian communities. Later in this service we shall exchange the peace as our sign of being members of the resurrection community and, as the poet George Herbert wrote, 'where there is peace, God is.'

Tom and I sat in the Garden Tomb. I don't think we had a dramatic earthquake moment of peace as St Paul did on the Road to Damascus, but more the experience of the two disciples on their way to Emmaus when they met the risen Jesus not realising who it was, but feeling their hearts burn within them.

In a similar way, John Wesley described his earthquake moment at a meeting in Aldersgate Street, London in 1738 when he felt his heart 'strangely warmed' with a deep conviction of peace he had never truly felt before. 'I felt I did trust in Christ,' he wrote in his Journal, 'Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.'

For the two Marys at the tomb the earthquake moment changed everything. Their encounter with the angel and with the risen Jesus transformed their lives. They felt compelled to believe, compelled to share and compelled to rejoice that what they thought had been the end, was in fact the beginning. Jesus' death was not a failure but a prelude to seeing the God of peace as the one who brings victory out of defeat, life out of death.

Michael Wilcockson