

Easter Day 2009

*Rise heart; thy Lord is risen.
Sing his praise Without delays,
Who takes thee by the hand,
that thou likewise With him mayst rise:
That, as his death calcined thee to dust,
His life may make thee gold,
and much more, just.*

Today we celebrate Christ's rising, and what better way than with George Herbert. It is a splendid festival, and, as usual with the Christian story, startlingly relevant to everyday life. Resurrection after crucifixion is not just history, it's about our experience, about what we do to ourselves.

We crucify ourselves by doing things that were done to Jesus: we deny the truth like Peter, we pass the buck like Pilate, we side with the majority in choosing evil like the crowd. We crucify Jesus and we crucify ourselves, that divine core within. And when the enormity and seriousness of what we've done strikes home, we are sick in the stomach, and weep like Peter.

It is at such moments that we're in the empty tomb, we are the empty tomb. We know the desolation of Mary Magdalene when she says 'they have taken away my Lord.' This is the true Mary speaking, completely open, completely vulnerable. It is at these empty-tomb moments that we too are at our most open and most vulnerable. We lose the outer crust of self.

In the empty tomb, Jesus' outer crust, the clothes and headwear, are left in position as if the body has simply dematerialised, and the clothing that had been wrapped around the body has just collapsed. It is as if the butterfly leaves the cocoon of earthly clothing. The butterfly, the imago, unlimited by gravity to the surface of the earth, and soon, at the Ascension, to be unlimited by time. Thus is death transformed.

In the garden, the risen Jesus asks the desolate Mary what troubles her, but through her tears she doesn't recognize him. Not unreasonably, she supposes him to be the gardener.

AND SO HE IS. Listen to these words preached on today's Gospel by Bishop Lancelot Andrewes to King James I on Easter Sunday 1620.

Christ may well be said to be a gardener, and indeed is one. The first, the fairest garden that ever was, Paradise. He was the gardener, it was of His planting. And ever since, it is He That as God makes all our gardens green, sends us yearly the spring, and all the herbs and flowers we then gather. So a gardener in that sense.

But not in that alone; but He it is who gardens our 'souls' too, and makes them like a well-watered garden; weeds out of them whatsoever is noisome or unsavoury, sows and plants them with true roots and seeds of righteousness, waters them with the dew of His grace, and makes them bring forth fruit to eternal life.

But it is none of all these, but besides all these, no over and above all these, this day if ever, most properly He was a gardener. Christ rising was indeed a gardener, Who made such a herb grow out of the ground this day as the like was never seen before, a dead body to shoot forth alive out of the grave.

In the desolation of our vulnerable and unprotected selves at empty-tomb moments, renewal begins. Christian teaching is that just as Jesus bore the venom and cruelty of the crowd then, so he does now. We bring it into the present each time we celebrate HC. We throw our regrets behind us and start all over again. And since guilt is the single most disabling thing that afflicts humanity, this is good news.

All this is resurrection, all this is Easter, all this is Christ Jesus the gardener at work.

Today is the day we're handed the key that unlocks the door of the Easter Garden: the day of which Blessed George Herbert wrote:

*Can there be any day but this,
Though many sunnes to shine endeavour?
We count three hundred, but we misse:
There is but one, and that one ever.*