

Easter Sunday 16th April 2017. Canongate Kirk.

St John 20:1 *Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark...*

The evening service held here as it got dark on Good Friday, when we welcomed friends from the neighbouring congregations of St Patrick's RC Church and Old St Paul's Scottish Episcopal Church, brought to an end this year's series of ecumenical services for Holy Week which began with last Sunday afternoon's pilgrimage service down the Royal Mile. It in turn began at the Mercat Cross, the place of proclamation on the High Street and then wended its way down the Royal Mile pausing on the pavement near the three participating churches and ending up in the ruins of the Abbey at the Palace of Holyroodhouse. It occurred to me as I left the Palace that we could quite easily have held the whole event in its grounds, which have all the necessary ingredients to provide the most appropriate settings for the extracts of the Passion that were read out. The gardens, for the Garden of Gethsemane; the forecourt, for the courtyard of Pontius Pilate; and the burial grounds within the Abbey itself, for the tomb where Jesus was laid. And that would be all very acceptable and maybe we'll try it ourselves sometime, but I can't help thinking it would lack the extra dimension that is supplied by making our way down the street, with all its accompanying noises off and crowds coming and going. This year we had to contend with the usual range of buskers busking, tour guides touting and tourists touring up and down, backwards and forwards, up and down the Royal Mile as well as the drilling and diversions currently associated with the gas works up towards the Bridges. Yesterday it was announced that Edinburgh's Royal Mile had come second in a recent tourist survey of the prettiest streets in the United Kingdom, second after York's The Shambles, that is, though it seems to me that it's not very pretty at the moment and indeed something of a shambles itself. And yet that's what made last Sunday's event more realistic, because it was surely more like the atmosphere in Jerusalem as Jesus came and went in those last dramatic days. The city was full of people who were there for the Passover, both those who lived locally and those who had travelled a distance to fulfil the requirements of their religion. They would be busy going about their business and doing what they had to do, while others were curious as to what they were up to and others still entirely indifferent. Just as it was on the Royal Mile last week.

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark... It was a different story by the time the empty tomb was discovered in the silence of an early morning. After all the loud noise that had echoed around the streets from the moment the crowds cried Hosanna to the moment they shouted Crucify, after the quiet murmurs of conversation and speculation as the trial and the torture and the crucifixion itself unfolded, after all that noise, silence, after all those people, emptiness. *Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark... Christ has risen while earth slumbers, Christ has risen where hope died.* But hope returned before dawn that morning, *Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark...* and even today amidst all the noise and threats and tensions of these turbulent times, when the talk is of scaremongering and warmongering, it is the silence of the empty tomb that brings hope to an anxious world, and the promise of the sunrise that brings light and peace.

*Let the moon embrace the blessing; let the sun sustain the cheer;
Let the world confirm the rumour. Christ is risen, God is here!*

And now may God bless to us this preaching of his most holy word, and to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be all praise and glory now and forever. Amen.