

## **Bereavement Service – sermon by The Reverend Colin James**

19 November 2017 John 20.11-20

I always look forward to this service. First, I know how much it means to many people. It's a chance to assure you that you're not forgotten. And nor are your loved ones. They remain just that: loved. By you of course. And this is an occasion to reaffirm that love.

But that's not all. As Christians we believe that all love between humans reflects the fact that there is a loving God. God is love. And has made us to love and to be loved. It's when we forget that that things start to go wrong in our lives. When we lose a loved one even the most ordinary things just don't look the same. Taking time to remember the good things we shared with our loved ones, now sadly departed, can help us cope with our feelings of loss.

This is also a time when those of us who've tried to be there for you in the days following your loss are really glad to see you again. For us sharing those times is a great privilege which we value very much. What could be more precious than offering the assurance of God's love at a time when he might seem very far away? So, thank you for letting us be with you then. And of course, I'm not forgetting our bereavement visitors who are still there for you afterwards, if you find that helpful.

A moment ago, we heard a reading about a meeting between Jesus and Mary Magdalene after he had risen from the dead. We saw him comforting a very dear friend who thought she'd lost him for good. We know from other episodes in the Bible how deeply Jesus felt for those who'd lost someone dear to them. And in one case he made no attempt to hide his own grief when a friend had died. So, when he comes face to face with the tearful Mary his sympathy is very genuine. She suffered the agony of seeing him cruelly and unjustly put to death. And now her grief is redoubled when she discovers that someone has taken him away. Or so she thinks. But she's wrong. Through her tears she's unable to recognise her friend standing in front of her. It's the sound of Jesus' voice, and in particular his voice calling her name, that changes everything.

She can't understand how this can be. Even today we don't understand either. But we know, as she did, that Jesus is alive. Now Mary has to deal with another shock. Jesus hasn't come back to make everything just the way it was before. She mustn't try to cling to what is past. The new life of Jesus is for the present and the future. And it tells her, and us, that we need never be alone again.

When we lose someone we love we have to get used to the fact that things can never be the same as they were before. However hard, we have to learn to let go, as Mary did. But that doesn't mean to forget. It helps to remember the good things they did and the things they valued and stood for. Like that they live on, not just in our memory, but as an inspiration, for us and for those around us.

We also believe that the new kind of life Mary Magdalene saw in Jesus is God's gift to all his children. It's his way of showing us that love cannot in the end be defeated. It's stronger than

death. It tells us that our true life lies ahead of us. And that in God's presence our tears will be wiped away. Mourning and crying and pain will be no more.

I know it's easy to say, "Never lose hope". It's often not so easy to remain hopeful, especially when the things that made life sweet seem to slip away from us. So it's important not to imagine that Christian hope works like a magic trick. It helps to realise that God's care usually reaches us through the action of other people.

Some years ago, I broke down on a freezing day on the M4. When at last help arrived, the mechanic saw my dog collar and said, "I thought you had someone who looked after you." "I have indeed, I said, and he sent you along!" I know that's a bit frivolous. But we do well to remember that whenever one of us shows concern or support for another person, we're behaving as the loving beings God created us to be. Hope, like help, may come to us when we're least expecting it, and from an unexpected source. And often those who show love and care are amazed to be told they're doing God's work.

We're here today to give thanks for the lives of our loved ones and to take comfort from their memory. But because we come together to do this, we're also offering something to each other that we couldn't receive if we were on our own. This afternoon in God's house we believe that he's here for us too, reaching out, as Jesus did during his earthly life, to offer healing for our hurts and hope for our future.

Colin James