

What's the most exciting thing that's ever happened to you? Maybe the first time you went away on holiday, or when you got married, or had a new little brother or sister, or started your first job, or....? Can you remember how it felt? Maybe it was even a bit frightening or overwhelming at the time, but now when you remember it you can see how exciting it really was, and what a difference it made. Whatever it was, you were there and it was happening to you.

On the other hand, I'm sure there have been times when someone else is telling a story or a joke – maybe quite a long and complicated one – and your mind had started to wander, and then suddenly everyone else started to laugh and you realised you'd missed the whole point of the story – you'd missed the punchline. Although you were there, you just weren't with it, and if you do want to know what it was all about, someone else will have to tell you.

Over the last few weeks we've been hearing about a little group of people, the disciples, who decided to give up their ordinary lives and become followers of a man called Jesus, because they believed that he was the son of God. It must have sounded very unlikely, but the things he told them and the way he behaved had completely convinced them that it was true. He had convinced lots of other people as well, to the point where, when he arrived at Jerusalem a few days before the big religious festival of Passover, crowds of people had lined the streets and cheered him on. They too thought that he must be the Messiah. Their holy books told them that God would send a man who would kick out the Romans who had invaded their country and make them into a great nation again, like they had been when David was their king. They and the disciples all believed that something tremendously exciting was happening.

And then, over the course of a few days, everything went disastrously wrong. One of the disciples tipped off the Jewish leaders. One night Jesus was arrested, and by midday the following day he had been condemned by the Jews, interrogated by the Roman governors, taunted and flogged by the soldiers and nailed to a wooden cross just outside the city. Three hours later he was dead. All of a sudden it stopped being tremendously exciting. It was terrifying, instead. What might happen to you if the authorities thought you were one of Jesus's followers? People who had been cheering for Jesus quietly slipped away, hoping that no-one would remember. Jesus's disciples and some of the women who had been part of the group locked themselves away, hoping that no-one would come looking for them. When it was safe, they would just have to go back to their old lives. It had all been an awful mistake, with a ghastly ending.

So none of the people who had been closest to Jesus were actually there when the real miracle happened. They didn't see the ending – the part that made sense of their previous experience, and made this truly the most exciting thing that had ever happened. They had to be told about it. When the women went to the tomb where Jesus's body had been left – it wasn't there! Instead there were two angels, who reminded them of what Jesus had told them and said that he had risen from the dead. What a story! The women went and told the disciples, who simply didn't believe them until Peter went and looked for himself. Jesus wasn't there – he had risen! He had told them that this would happen but they hadn't understood. It sounded impossible. But now, as they started to talk excitedly about it and get the women to tell their story again and again, suddenly it all made sense. Jesus Christ had risen! Everything he had said and promised was true. He was the son of God and they were his chosen disciples, and now it was up to them to tell the story.

But some people were there. The Jewish leaders had heard Jesus say that he would rise from the dead. They didn't believe him, but they persuaded Pilate to send soldiers to guard the tomb, just to make sure that nobody could steal the body. Some of you know that when I get the chance I study the illustrations in medieval books of psalms. Many of these have a picture of the resurrection, and I've copied one of them for you. It's from the Fitzwarin Psalter, which was made about 650 years ago, in the middle of the fourteenth century. It shows the moment of resurrection, when Jesus steps out of the tomb, watched by two angels in white robes – maybe the ones who told the women what had happened. Down at the side of the tomb are four soldiers holding shields. (I'm interested in the shields, which have fourteenth-century coats of arms on them, but that isn't why I've chosen this picture.) If you look carefully you can see that all four soldiers are fast asleep. Almost every resurrection picture I've seen has soldiers, and they are almost always asleep, except in one or two pictures one of them has one eye open and seems to be watching what is going on.

What happened to the soldiers? They weren't there when the women arrived or when Peter turned up. Did God make them doze off? Did they wake up later, see the angels and find that Jesus had disappeared? They must have been terrified. A Roman soldier who fell asleep on duty would be executed. Maybe they just decided to disappear too – after all, nobody was going to believe any explanation they could give. Men in white robes? Angels? A dead body just got up and walked off?

Nobody saw the resurrection. Everyone had to be told. The angels were God's messengers to the women. The women brought the message to the disciples. The disciples brought the message to the world – and here we are, two thousand years later, hearing the message and believing, as they did, that it is true. We mustn't be like the soldiers, dozing off and missing the whole point of the story. What God promised and Jesus preached has happened. Christ is risen, and therefore we are loved, valued and forgiven, and will have a place in heaven with him. Our psalm, which was written a thousand years before Jesus was born, has got it exactly right. 'This is the Lord's doing and it is marvellous in our eyes. This is the day that the Lord has made – we will rejoice and be glad in it!'