



As I write this, another round of promotion boards is taking place in the Northern Ireland Civil Service. For many months now, thousands of civil servants have geared themselves up for interviews, poring over the competencies for their respective grades, and maximising the contributions that they have made in their various areas of work in the hope of persuading their interview panels that they simply must be promoted. A huge amount of work goes into preparing for boards, but for many it is all for nothing - most candidates are not successful. For those who are successful however, getting that longed for email from HR Connect (the NICS personnel system) is a special moment. The seeming endless hours of effort, the apprehension, the almost unbearable, energy-sapping stress of the actual interview, are all worthwhile. Getting promoted is one of the high points of life: it lifts the spirits, it makes you happy. Such highlights in life can be rare. Sometimes it seems that the only things that happen to us are bad. Indeed, they may happen so rarely, that when they do we may even feel suspicious and wonder just what the catch is!

I sometimes think of a woman who experienced a special moment in her life. A moment that lifted her, in an instant, from desolation to great joy. A highlight that didn't have a catch...

Mary Magdalene was not in good form on the first Easter Sunday, nearly 2,000 years ago. She had lost the person whom she loved more than any other - Jesus, who had been put to death two days earlier. Jesus had changed Mary's life: He had loved her, forgiven her many sins, made her a new person - then He was gone. She had seen Him beaten, and then mocked and humiliated as He was subjected to that most savage form of Roman execution, crucifixion.

Following His death it had been necessary to embalm His body hastily and place it in the tomb of a friend before the Sabbath day arrived. When the Sabbath was over, Mary, along with some other women, were able to go and anoint His body properly. And Mary was anxious to do so: it was the last act of devotion that she could show Jesus, just as putting up a headstone on a grave may be the last act of

devotion that we can show for our loved ones. After this there was nothing that she would be able to do, except perhaps keep His memory alive by talking about Him with His other followers.

One imagines that she didn't sleep well the night before, afflicted as she no doubt was by the awful pain and restlessness of grief, her mind perhaps racing as she tried to make sense of all that had happened. She got up early (John ch 20) and set off to the garden where the tomb was. Probably exhausted, but hurrying, driven by adrenalin.

But when she arrived at the tomb she found it empty, the massive stone that had been placed over its entrance had been moved to one side. Where was Jesus' body? Who had taken it? She was distraught that it was missing, and when the gardener appeared and asked her why she was weeping, she assumed that he might have had something to do with its disappearance. Only ... he wasn't the gardener - he was Jesus!! "Mary" He said to her, and as soon as He spoke her name she recognised Him. Something about the way He said it must have been so familiar to her!

What was that moment like for Mary, when she realised it was Jesus? Think about it for a moment: she had gone to a tomb to embalm Jesus' mutilated, lifeless body; instead He approached her and spoke to her as she stood crying. Can you imagine her joy?! Can you imagine how her heart must have leapt?! All the pain, all the hopelessness and disappointment that she had felt those previous couple of days must have just evaporated. I cannot think that anyone has known greater exultation, ever, than Mary felt in that instant when she realised that this man, the gardener as she had supposed him to be, was in fact Jesus, her precious friend and Master. No longer dead, but well and truly alive!! No notification of promotion or financial windfall, no longed-for baby, no "good news" from a GP or hospital consultant, nothing else can come near to matching the joy that Jesus' resurrection meant for Mary, and indeed, for all His followers.

I once heard a minister exhort his congregation to spend a few minutes each day contemplating the Cross, and all that Jesus suffered and accomplished for us there. I would suggest that we should also frequently contemplate the empty tomb. We should go in our minds to the garden and imagine Mary meeting the risen Lord. Such reflection will lift us, because the joy that Mary felt is our joy, too, if we know Him as our Lord and Saviour. It will give us hope as we face the challenges and disappointments of life, and enable us, even in the bleakest times – and, oh, how bleak times can be - to rejoice in that most glorious truth: that Christ is risen from the dead!!