

# Courage & Celebration - 17th July 2022

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Preacher: Lucy Winkett

[ 0 : 00 ] Thank you. Thank you so much. And thanks for your warm welcome this morning. I drove up from London this morning. So I was just saying to somebody that I had an early start, but it was great because the motorways were all completely clear. I was in my Skoda pretending it was a Ferrari, had all my music on, and it was actually a really great experience.

So thank you for having me, and thank you to Ruth for asking me to come and join you on this really special day. I'll say a little bit more about our connection a bit later. I just thought I'd say just a little bit about where I'm coming from so that you know who's speaking to you today.

It's great to be back in the West Midlands, actually, although I live in London, and I've lived in London now for quite a number of years. I spent three years in Birmingham training for the ministry at Queen's College, but actually Staffordshire is a really important place for me personally because a very good friend of mine, a Methodist minister called Jeff, used to play the bass, and I used to sing in a band, and so I'm afraid that the pubs of Staffordshire are more familiar to me than the churches.

I'm sorry about that, but we used to go around Stafford and sometimes in Birmingham. That was some time ago, but it's fantastic to be back here. Jeff actually was chaplain to Stafford Rangers Football Club. I don't know if there are any fans here from that either.

I moved to Manor Park in East London, and then oddly, for the last 20 years, actually, I've lived right in the centre of London, which is a weird place. It's a weird place to live. Right now, I'm at a church called St. James's Piccadilly, and because I've got a rather childish sense of humour, you know, when it's all kicking off, like this morning, three o'clock, it was so noisy this morning. All the clubs were coming out, the pubs were coming out, and I thought to myself, blimey, it's like Piccadilly Circus around here. And then, of course, that's where I live.

[ 1 : 44 ] So I've always lived in a city, either Birmingham or London, and now I'm at St. James's Church, and that's where I came across Ruth. I'm the rector there, and Ruth was our pastoral assistant there for nearly two years, all in all.

And our congregation there, obviously, nobody really lived. I mean, if you do know Piccadilly Circus in London, you know that not many people live there. I live there, but that's about it. So not many people live there. It's lots of shops and pubs and clubs, famously.

There are more people at Piccadilly Circus at 3 a.m. on a Saturday than at 3 p.m. on a Saturday. That's the kind of place it is. So Ruth came to us as pastoral assistant, and just very recently, Ruth, I was thinking about you, because I was in our historic building.

We've got this big, high-ceilinged historic building, 1684. It's one of those classic kind of Church of England buildings, and the pews are all fixed. So it's quite difficult to do what I just saw on your fantastic video there with the hokey-cokey.

It's quite difficult to do that, because all the pews are fixed in the church. But we were holding a party hosted by our international group, which is people mostly from Uganda, Nigeria, and Ghana, who have been through the asylum system in the UK.

[ 3 : 02 ] There was a party, and Ruth was very much part of that work, and so was James when they were part of our church. There I was a couple of weeks ago at this party hosted by the international group in the aisle of the church dancing to Abba, Dancing Queen, which, if you don't know, is the best song in the world.

I was stuffed full of jerk chicken and jollof rice singing at the top of my voice and dancing. It was at that moment that I thought of Ruth Edmonds. So Ruth really gave us so much joy and inclusion in our church community, and I know that you value her ministry.

It's been a real pleasure for us to be a small part of her ministry, and a huge privilege and pleasure for me personally to be here today. So I just want to thank you for that.

And as Ruth has been ordained a priest, she's now taking the communion service here for the first time. And so I'll say a little bit more perhaps about that later on. That's quite enough about my journeys, my music tastes, and my dancing in the aisles of a church.

The gospel is our focus, of course, today. We're going to listen to the 20th chapter of John's gospel, the first 18 verses. Here it is. Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance.

[ 4 : 24 ] So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him. So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb.

Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there, but did not go in.

Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the cloth that had been wrapped round Jesus' head.

The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen. Finally, the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside.

He saw and believed. They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.

[ 5 : 31 ] Then the disciples went back to where they were staying. Now Mary stood outside the tomb, crying.

As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.

They asked her, Woman, why are you crying? They have taken my Lord away, she said, and I don't know where they have put him.

At this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus. He asked her, Woman, why are you crying?

Who is it you are looking for? Thinking he was the gardener, she said, Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him.

[ 6 : 35 ] Jesus said to her, Mary. She turned towards him and cried out in Aramaic, Rabbuni, which means teacher.

Rabbuni. Jesus said, Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father.

Go instead to my brothers and tell them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God. Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news.

I have seen the Lord. And she told them that he had said these things to her. In that gospel is everything.

The core of our faith, the reason that we're here, everything can be put into that part of John's gospel, just towards the end of it there. There's an old legend that started to emerge in the first hundred years after Jesus was crucified and rose.

[ 7 : 56 ] And the legend goes like this. Jesus returned to heaven after his time on earth. St. Michael, the angel, met him at the gates. Obviously, Peter hadn't got there yet.

How did it go? Said Michael. It went as it had to, said Jesus. So what have you done to make sure your work continues?

Said Michael. Have you left them instructions? Jesus shook his head. Have you built a building for them to organise themselves and meet in? No.

Have you done some fundraising so they know they can survive? No. Have you written them a book so they can remember everything you said? No. Have you started some clubs they can join?

No. Have you got a large number of people to build something solid that you know is going to last? Jesus shook his head to all of it. Michael was shocked. Well, what have you done to make sure it all carries on after you leave?

[ 8 : 57 ] And Jesus said, well, I've left Mary and Peter and another Mary and John and James and some of my family. Is that enough?

Said Michael. Jesus said, I have made no other plans. The film that we saw of the Gospel of John is a rollercoaster of a story and everything is there.

By everything that's logical, by everything that's the rules of the world, as it were, we shouldn't really be sitting here now 2,000 years later. It was so precarious back then.

Just think back. That little group of disciples were hiding. We read in John's Gospel they were behind locked doors. They were scared. They were afraid of the violence that had been meted out to Jesus and they thought the same might happen to them.

And for some of them, of course, it did later on. Peter was beside himself because he denied Jesus. Judas had taken his own life, his reaction to handing Jesus over to the authorities.

[10:06] James, John, Matthew, they were hiding. They were locked away, afraid. Into that situation comes this amazing figure of Mary Magdalene.

She's out and about, no doubt moving carefully so she's not caught or recognised. It must have been really frightening, but she can't not go.

She takes what she needs to the tomb, the spices to anoint the body. Talk about bravery to do this. For some of us of a certain age, you could say she was the original Spice Girl, full of girl power, bravery.

I took a workshop not long ago where I asked a group of people, some of whom were church people and some of whom weren't, whether they could name any famous Christian women. There was quite a silence, I have to say. Then somebody said the Queen. Everyone nodded. Somebody then said Dot from EastEnders. Somebody else said the Vicar from Emmerdale, although she used to be a police officer.

[11:18] Sophie, Sally's daughter from Coronation Street. And then somebody said Brittany Spears. Oh no, but she used to be, she isn't anymore. Somebody else said Joan of Arc. One of the key things about that list is that nearly all of them are not real.

And one of them is alive and famously has just celebrated her Platinum Jubilee and is over 90. Mary Magdalene is an extraordinary character in the Gospels.

And sometimes it's been quite hard for us men or women to take on the mantle that Mary Magdalene has showed us because she's brave. She steps out when the others were afraid.

And there are key decision points in this Gospel, in this story, that any of us can relate to after the death of Jesus and looking in amazement at his resurrection.

When is it that you would rather have stayed indoors, would you say? Stayed away, stayed alone, but knew in your bones you just had to get up, you had to go out and had to do what you had to do.

[12:29] That's Mary Magdalene's choice. These kinds of moments come to any of us, sometimes in a faith context, sometimes just in our life, when we've been through a lot and everyone recently has been through a lot.

When is it that we would rather stay indoors or stay alone? It's hard to get up and go out and do what we have to do. As it has been for Mary Magdalene, life was complicated.

She needed healing when she first met Jesus. The call of us as disciples, as followers of Jesus, perhaps in the manner of Mary Magdalene, is to try to resist locking ourselves away at moments of crisis, to go towards God because God will always be, as in the parable of the prodigal son, running the other way, running to meet us.

It's hard for us sometimes to set off, to step out, to move towards God when we've been through a lot. Mary comes to the tomb and she finds it empty.

Logically, she assumes the body has been stolen. We heard it there in John's Gospel, which is a crisis. It's a horrifying thing to happen. What's her instinct here?

[13:52] Perhaps it's like yours or mine. She goes for help in the face of a crisis when she doesn't know what's happened to the body. She goes for help to, in this case, Peter and probably John.

Peter acts a bit differently on hearing that crisis news. The body's been stolen. What does he do? He runs towards the problem. He runs towards the tomb to see for himself.

We, as Christians in our faith, do both of those things sometimes, don't we? Sometimes we just need to go for help, ask someone for help. Other times, we run towards that problem, run towards that crisis, and try to fix it.

And Mary Magdalene, remember the Gospel, this beautiful and brave disciple, is alone again after Peter and John leave. Everyone's confused.

Everyone's gone away, not sure where, perhaps to try to sort things out or to have a think about what to do. And she hears that extraordinary question from Christ, which is a question for all of us today.

[15:03] Jesus says to her, why are you crying? I believe this is Christ's question to any of us. As we heard in our prayers just now, we're going through a lot.

Lots of people are going through a lot. Not just when we're upset, but for any of us who are grown-ups in the world, there's always aspects of life, our lives personally, or our life together, that causes us grief.

Or if we feel somehow that God has gone, as Mary did, that question is key. Why, why are you crying? Where are your tears this morning?

What we learn from that conversation between Mary and Jesus is that we're not asked to present a cleaned-up version of ourselves to God, one that's more acceptable, we are able, as Mary did, to show Jesus our sadness, our regrets, our losses, our huge anxieties sometimes.

Jesus says, why are you crying? Our answer might be, I'm crying because I'm tired all the time. I'm crying because I'm beside myself with worry at my bills, or because I'm feeling ill and I'm afraid to go to the GP, or because I'm so worried about my daughter or my son, I just don't know what to do.

[16:37] Jesus' question, the same as the question to Mary Magdalene, why are you crying? Please tell me. Please be honest in your prayer. Don't tell me what you think I should hear.

Tell me the truth. And what does Mary do? She does just that. She tells Jesus the truth. She says, they've taken the body away and I don't know where it is.

I don't know what to do. I don't know what to do. I'm at a loss. I don't have any more answers. I don't know what to do. I don't know what to do. As adults, often we're expected to know what to do, most if not all of the time.

But the secret is, very often, we just don't. Most days, I'm not really sure if I'm doing the right thing. I trust in God. I will pray to God.

Very often in my prayer, I want to say to Christ, I don't know what to do. But I want to tell Christ the truth about my life and about the world that we're living in.

[17:47] This conversation between Jesus and Mary is one that goes to the heart of what it is to be a human being in the world. Then, as now.

And there's more. What is Jesus' reaction to this? As I said in the story, not a manual. He doesn't say, well, this, here are my instructions to you. This is what you should do.

He just says her name. Astonishing. He just says Mary. And she knows him as if for the first time. They recognize each other. She recognizes Christ as if for the first time. Jesus says her name. Jesus, this morning, says your name.

I once heard a preacher in a church in Birmingham tell a congregation that there are angels in heaven doing high fives at the very mention of your name.

[18:56] This was a congregation that was struggling, really struggling personally and together. Jesus says your name. One of the spiritual writers I most admire wrote something like this.

When I get to heaven, God is not going to look at me and say, why weren't you Mother Teresa or why weren't you Martin Luther King? God is going to look at me and say, why were you not Lucy Winkett?

Why were you not the one I created you to be? No one wants to live someone else's life by mistake. None of us want to spend life waiting for it to start.

Mary Magdalene's conversation with Jesus meant that she heard her name. No one else's her name. And it completely changed the energy that she had.

We heard it in the gospel. She was in despair and she simply ran to tell the other disciples, I've seen the Lord. It was that recognition, hearing her name, that caused her to reach out.

[20:02] Of course, why wouldn't you? She tried to hang on to Jesus. She tried to kind of reach out and touch him, of course, but perhaps also she was trying to hold on to something from the past, the old relationship that she'd had with him.

Again, Jesus' words are astonishing, incredible. Don't try to hang on to me, he says. A new world is possible. A new set of relationships is starting.

You are going to have to be brave, though, because what I want you to do is not stay here but go and tell my brothers that I'm ascending to your father and my father, to your God and my God.

And we all know that Mary did go and she said what she'd seen and experienced and no one believed her. That takes huge courage for any of us to speak of our own life, our own experiences and risk them being ignored or criticised to talk about our faith and simply not be believed.

That's what happened to Mary. She went. She didn't stay and try to hang on to something from the past. She went to a place where in fact she wasn't believed but she went anyway.

[ 21 : 18 ] The whole Easter story is there at the centre of our life as human beings in the world in 2022. So we're here to celebrate and that word is so important celebrate communion together this morning.

But this communion service as every communion service isn't just a celebration it's a broken hearted celebration because the Easter story is at the centre of this communion that we celebrate here this morning.

All of us celebrate and one presides and that's what Ruth will be doing a bit later for us. All of us are celebrating this communion. Why? Because it's held that it comes from the story of the very night before Jesus died.

He says that he is going to die tomorrow on the night before he died we'll hear. So this communion service is a celebration of course but it's a broken hearted celebration.

this fundamental gospel the example of Mary Magdalene and this first celebration of communion leads me on finally to ask the very nature of what it means to be church in the real world in 2022 in this context and in any other context as in mine in London.

[ 22 : 42 ] In a few moments time we're going to take part in that what's called the Eucharistic prayer which concludes with the response we break this bread to share in the body of Christ.

It's a fundamental statement about who we are as a group of people who we are as a church in our community and who we are together.

We church across the world are not so much a particular party with a particular attitude particularly not politically but it's not our fundamental character.

We are church which simply means assembly it means we're gathered we're a meeting in the name of Christ to worship God to be re-energised as we heard later on like Mary Magdalene by hearing God say our name but we have distinctive characteristics that make church different from every other sort of group that we might belong to.

We're infused by the spirit of God you might say irrigated by the spirit of God who flows into this assembly like water because we say we're many but we are one body because we all share in one bread and when a priest celebrates communion for the first time our whole character as a church is brought into sharp focus because what Ruth will do later is four things the bread is taken it's blessed it's broken and given it's taken it's blessed it's broken and given and I want to suggest in the light of this gospel of John that this gives us our own pattern for living in the world that we ourselves the body of Christ in the world are taken and blessed and broken and given it's in our DNA as disciples of Christ and disciples of Jesus it's in our DNA that we're part of the body of Christ taken blessed broken and given first we're taken we're taken up into the life of the spirit in moments of worship together or in moments of quiet alone when we're praying together we don't have a lot of time in modern life sometimes for that kind of space that kind of being taken up into the life of the spirit in work and personal life there's a lot that we've got to get through there's a lot to do simply to keep things going and society often values perhaps overvalues

[ 25 : 34 ] I want to say that drivenness that personal achievement purposeful movement through life of course those things are important but sometimes you know we need the spirit to be alive in the cracks of our lives in the in-between places of our lives where are the in-between times of my life and where are they for us as a church do we have enough of them to be open to that kind of being taken up by God's purposes and God's presence because what happens in that is that we're given a much longer perspective and a deeper sense of our own identity and our own purpose in life we are taken as the body of Christ second we are blessed the promise God makes is that we are blessed Jesus says in the book of Revelation I am with you always to the end of time

I will keep you wherever you go but as you and I know because we're grown ups in the world this is not necessarily a promise for an easy life blessing blessing doesn't translate into pain free or smooth running or easy blessing is the abundant outrageous undeserved profligate love that gets poured into the world and poured out on you and upon me our job as people is to notice it and learn ever more deeply to live in the knowledge of it one kind of perhaps small illustration of this in 2018 I had the amazing opportunity it was a difficult trip but I went to Syria and the war was still going on and in that city of Aleppo which has been almost completely destroyed we were walking through the ruins of these flats and blocks of flats that had simply been bombed nothing there looked like a moonscape in some ways looked like the surface of the moon but in the middle of that utter

destruction there were amazing flocks of birds swallows swooping around extraordinary blackbirds I wasn't expecting to hear blackbirds in Syria but the undefeated song of the birds was a moment of blessing in the middle of the rubble of human war and human violence what are the blessings sometimes our lives can feel a bit like that kind of wasteland if we're having a difficult time but the blessings are still there not for an easy life but for an abundant life and for what do we want to give thanks today we are taken as the body of Christ we are blessed as the body of Christ and the third action we'll hear in the communion is that we're broken I mentioned that a communion service is always even on a day like Christmas Day or Easter Day it's a broken hearted celebration why because Christian faith will always resist any attempts to pretend that life is not real Jesus didn't do that and neither were we as the years go on sometimes our brokenness is not so visible to others we're really good at hiding it sometimes but the church us as an assembly here or in London wherever we are over the world has to know how to be broken hearted otherwise the broken hearted people won't know that they belong here too there's no substitute for getting to know the desolate parts of ourselves because then others who are desolate or lost or destitute will know that they too can belong in the church knowing that this part of ourselves is where God is most likely to be found yes we are taken we are blessed we're broken and lastly we're given our calling as an assembly as a church as individual Christians in our own lives as the body of Christ is not just to be all that we can be in a kind of self help way for our own sake our calling although that's a good thing to do our calling is to be fully the person we are to hear Jesus call our name why in order to give ourselves away to give ourselves in worship to God and to give ourselves in our community so a key question for me as an individual Christian and for us as a group of Christians how do we give ourselves away in our community there was a former rector of my church St.

[ 30 : 51 ] James's Piccadilly who was called William Temple he was there during the first world war and he said famously that the church is the only institution in society that exists for the benefit of the people who do not belong to it to keep that open heartedness that outward looking to the rest of the world is not always easy especially when we're struggling ourselves with a whole variety of challenges but back to that gospel of John those disciples were too they were in chaos they were afraid they were locked away and they had to try to be brave to step out but to keep our own hearts and minds prized open to keep the thresholds of our churches physically and emotionally and socially low all of these things are practical ways for us to give ourselves away because the body of Christ is alive in the world today through you through your life and through your witness as we heard earlier in the service there's so much in modern life to be worried about climate change causing this intense heat we're still recovering from the pandemic of course the cost of living the pressure on young people the housing crisis we celebrate this communion and celebrate this gospel in this real world celebrating you as a church community in this place celebrating

Ruth's first celebration of the Eucharist but always in celebrating remembering our own broken heartedness and the broken heartedness of all grown up human living in the world that other broken hearted people might know that they have a place to belong here we're sent as Mary was sent to tell the good news that death which so many people are so afraid of is not the end we're sent as Mary was into places where we simply will not be believed but for Christ's sake listening to that gospel and sharing this communion together we are now the body of Christ on the earth we say it later in this service Christ after the resurrection and ascension has no hands now on earth but yours no feet on earth but yours no body but yours what an extraordinary adventure we're on to be the body of

Christ in the world taken blessed broken and given thanks be to God for all that is past and to all that is to come whatever it is as we follow Jesus in the world today let us say yes let us say amen amen to