

The old man had been a soldier of the Second World War, and then a coalminer. When he died his grave was a simple place, with a black headstone, bearing his name and the dates of his birth and death. The earth itself is simply grassed over. About a year after his death his daughter came from Germany, accompanied by her German husband, and they brought with them a beautiful black lantern, which they placed on the grave. It is a fairly familiar custom in Germany to adorn the graves of loved ones with lanterns, and to light candles in them on those special days in November when the dead are commemorated. How poignant, too, that a German son-in-law should place a lantern on the grave of an Australian soldier. Sadly they never got the chance to light the lantern on that grave, for within a few weeks of it being placed there, the beautiful lantern was stolen.

This stealing from graves is nothing rare these days. “Is nothing sacred?” someone asks. Apparently not. Yet it remains a most upsetting thing to have anything stolen from a grave. Our loved ones are so precious to us, and their graves are sacred places. Though they are gone from us, we tend their graves and keep them neat and tidy, just as we hold their memory ever dear.

On the morning of Easter day, the women who went to the tomb were about to begin the process of tending the grave, by anointing the dead body of Jesus and then re-closing the tomb. How shocked they must have been to see the stone rolled away. How much more upsetting to discover that the body was not there. It must have been stolen! “Someone has taken it!” was Mary Magdalen’s cry. Going back to the disciples, the women bring the terrible news.

Of course this news has to be verified, so Peter and John run to the garden where the tomb is located, and the evidence is lying there before them. Grave cloths on the ground. Head cloth rolled up in a place by itself. What does it mean? What has happened here? This is not the work of grave robbers. Why would **they** unwrap the body? No. Something stranger still than grave robbery has happened here. This is death robbery. Death has been robbed of its power. Of its power to devastate and destroy. Life has returned to this place, and to this world, and to our lives.

“Until this moment,” the Gospel of John says, “the disciples had failed to understand the teaching of scripture, that he must rise from the dead.” Some things are very hard for us to understand. Some things are outside of our experience, and some are beyond our wildest expectations. For many people, some things are beyond the realms of possibility. Rising from the dead is one of those things. It just does not happen. All the evidence tells us that death is pretty final. It is the end of everything. It is our dissolution.

Acceptance of the fact of death is in many ways a mature attitude, a realistic response to the fact of our mortality. Yet there is another response, a rebellion against death, a protest, that Dylan Thomas, the poet, so eloquently expressed when he told us to “rage, rage against the dying of the light”. Death must not have the final word.

Now, here, on this Easter day, we have the great discovery, the great find. Life wins. Love wins. John, the beloved disciple, who was to write so eloquently of life and love, went into the tomb..... “He saw and he believed.” What he saw was an empty tomb, but he also “saw” more deeply into the mystery of what the empty tomb means. It means that the Lord is risen, and in him the fullness of life has been restored to us. So, even the stealing of a lantern from a grave is not the end of the world. Christ is the light of the world, a light that darkness cannot overpower. Saint John saw that for himself on that first Easter morning. May that same Easter light shine on us today.