So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

We come to Easter morning. We have walked with Christ in the wilderness. We have pondered the meaning of the cross. We have followed the crowds who saw Jesus. We have sat at table as his friends, shared bread and wine, wondered at his taking the role of a servant, washing his friends’ feet.

We have stood at the cross, or perhaps not, as many then could not, to watch him die. To be abandoned is the hardest death of all. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? It wasn’t just God who forsook him that day.

And now with the women we come to the grave. It was a woman’s role, they brought spices to anoint the body. In Jewish burial customs a body was first buried in a temporary tomb. Only later, when just the bones were left, was it moved for permanent burial.

The women would have sat through the night grinding spices with which to anoint the body for this first burial. Perhaps in silence, just being together grinding the spices of grief. We don’t always need the right words. We sometimes just need to be together. That is something we have learnt anew through these past difficult months.

When they come to the tomb they expect to find nothing other than death. This is the end of their hopes, all their dreams, all their love. The world can be a cruel place.

We need to remember this. Our Easter morning begins as a day of mourning. We must grasp that reality if we are to understand what God is doing through his people. Happy clappy religion that sees the world through rose tinted glasses is about as much use as a chocolate fireguard.

In Easter our encounter with God is in the cross and the grave, and why are we surprised? Is this not the same God who acts in the wilderness? Is this not the same God whose voice is heard not in signs of power and glory, not in the earthquake, not in the mighty wind, not in the brilliance of fire, but comes to one terrified and alone, hiding in the wilderness, hearing God in the piercing silence?

Is this not the same God who looks to the desert to make new beginnings? The God who is more at home in a tent than a temple, in a stable than a palace.

So – if we can walk in the dawn light with the women we do so carrying the spices of grief. That last final act of love – which is all God needs. For it is they who discover the unthinkable, that in this ultimate desert place God is doing what God does best, and is making a new start.

Mark, as I have said many times, is a master story teller. You will notice what is missing from this story. Like that party game where you memorise a collection of items, then one is removed and you have to spot what is missing.

So what is missing from this Easter morning? The answer of course is Jesus. Nowhere in Mark’s Easter account do the disciples actually meet the risen Christ. The story ends at verse 8, the women running away, in terror and amazement, saying nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

That’s it. End of. Finito.

Our bibles of course have some extra verses, but those are very clearly added later to try to make sense of Mark’s abrupt ending. There are those who think Mark obviously wrote more but that has been lost. Think of a manuscript where someone picks it up but leaves the last page behind. Maybe it’s a simple as that.

Others, and I am one of them, think that Mark ended his Gospel this way by intention. He is a master story teller, and really good stories have untidy endings. Yes, in your average fairy tale they all lived happily ever after, one of our infant nativities even ended that way, which was a bit odd seeing it was performed under a stained glass window of Mary standing at the foot of the cross, but this isn’t a fairy story.

Mark is writing for people who choose to follow Jesus, and who choose to do so in a difficult and dangerous world, who would never themselves meet the risen Lord. For those people what happens next matters, and it matters very much.

They knew, as we know, that being a follower of Jesus isn’t easy. In fact for them it was often a life threatening choice. Can the story end with women running away in fear, saying nothing to anyone?

Yes it can. But if it had we wouldn’t be here today. But it didn’t. So we are.

In Mark’s account as we have it I suggest we find ourselves involved in this Easter morning. Do we encounter this truth and go away telling no-one? If we do that what happens next? Or can we hear him telling us – you are here because that’s not how it ended. And you can’t let it end that way today.

The story of Jesus, God’s greatest gift, ends like it started. As vulnerable and as weak as a baby born in a shed. A truth as fragile as a tale told by frightened people.

Yet this message of hope and of unbreakable love has endured. Today it is placed into our hands. In these strange and difficult times it us who run into the dawn, and what message have we to tell?