

Third Sunday service, 18 Apr 2021

Talk: Christ is risen!

Luke 24: 36-48 and Acts 3: 12-19

In today's gospel story, we're still in the first day of Easter. It's still that first Sunday evening after the crucifixion. In Luke's account, Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James and several other women went this morning to anoint Jesus's body, and saw the empty tomb. But when they reported back to the other disciples, those disciples thought it was "an idle tale"!

It's now the evening of that tumultuous day. The disciples are together when in bursts Cleopas and his wife, saying that Jesus appeared to them while they were walking to Emmaus. Not only is the tomb empty, but Jesus is alive!

The group is still discussing this news, presumably still along the lines of it being another "idle tale", when Jesus appears among them.

The parallel to last week's story of Thomas, who wanted confirmation, is very clear, and is often repeated through all the Gospel narratives of the resurrection. Jesus appears to some people – women in the garden, a husband and wife walking home, disciples in a locked room – and, when they share the astounding news, those who weren't there are sceptical. Which is pretty fair, it seems to me!

But Jesus *is* really there. Just as in the story of Thomas we heard last week, Jesus demonstrates that it's really him by showing off the wounds he received just a few days before, with the added detail here that he even eats some grilled fish, presumably the disciples' left-over dinner!

In these accounts, there's a real stress on the physicality of the resurrection. This is no mere ghost or spirit the disciples are seeing. No, this risen Jesus breaks bread after a long walk, offers his hands to be touched, and eats food.

Jesus, and the gospel writers, want us to know that the claim that Jesus is risen from the dead is no mere theoretical or spiritual or metaphorical story. Rather, it's an event that really happened and was witnessed by particular people. And the risen Christ was as real, as physical, as you or me.

And this risen Jesus is still teaching. He opens the scriptures to Cleopas and his wife as they walk to Emmaus. And he does the same for the disciples in a room back in Jerusalem. He opens the scriptures for his followers in a way that he didn't before his death – not in any new teaching about the Kingdom, but specifically about his own journey as God's Messiah.

During his ministry, Jesus was always cautious in talking about who he was, even to his disciples. He spoke in parables and allusions, so that the meaning was only visible to the disciples much later.

But now that he is risen, Jesus wants the disciples to be clear that this was all God's plan from the start. His death wasn't a mistake, and his rising again shouldn't be unexpected.

For Luke, it's also vital that the disciples are witnesses to all this – to Jesus's miracles and teaching, to his persecution and arrest, to his death and his resurrection – and many are still alive as he writes. What's more, this isn't the end of the story but rather the beginning of something: the proclamation of repentance and forgiveness to all nations, starting from Jerusalem.

We see this proclamation begin in our story from Acts.

Peter and John have just healed a man who was lame from birth, who was a well-known beggar at one of the main Temple gates. Just as you'd expect, a large crowd gathers to see what's going on (some thousands of people, we're later told), and it's to them that Peter is speaking in the story.

Peter addresses a particular group of people, with a particular history. This text is sometimes taken as saying that all Jews somehow killed Jesus, in order to justify antisemitism, but that's not what it says at all. We worship Jesus, who was born and lived as a Jew, who claimed the Jewish God as his father, who sent his disciples out to proclaim that Jewish God's Kingship over the entire world, whose New Covenant is tied to the original Covenant!

And what Peter says here is that these particular people are party to Jesus's execution – because they were there and took part themselves.

It's clear that the crowd remember what happened to Jesus. We don't know from Luke's account whether it was a few months ago or even a year. But the rabble-rousing preacher from Galilee who routed the traders from the very Temple where they stand? The religious leader who could out-talk the Pharisees? Yes, they'd remember what happened to him.

So, Peter tells them that he didn't heal this man through his own power, but through God's power. The God of their ancestors Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – the same God who sent Jesus, Peter says. The Jesus whose execution was cheered by many in this crowd. The Jesus who Peter calls 'the Holy and Righteous One', whom God has raised from the dead.

It was faith in this Jesus, Peter says, that brought healing to the lame man.

And the people here in the crowd need to repent – to turn to God so that their sins can be wiped out, to ask God to forgive them. Faith in the Jesus who healed the lame man can also put them right with God.

They don't need to repent because they're terrible, awful people. But simply because they're people, God's people, who God wants to be close to Him.

Peter's message rests on his actions in showing God's love and power. And that message is not condemnation but a call for repentance. Not the fear of death and hell, but an offer of love and relationship with God. A call to acknowledge that they've made mistakes, and the promise that God will welcome them eagerly if they just turn towards God.

Again, it isn't philosophy or metaphor or spirituality that underlies this story but real and physical actions. A lame man known to many if not most in the crowd is healed. A recent political and religious event is recalled. A familiar and loving message is shared.

The difference is in who's at the centre.

The crowd have known all their lives that God will forgive. They just need to make sacrifice and atone. They have to spend time and money to buy sacrificial animals and take their turn at Temple, and put their social standing at risk by admitting they need to do all this.

What Peter says is new. Jesus, who this crowd had rejected only months ago, is alive and powerful and holy, and is willing and able welcome them into God's presence. The price is nothing: no money, no animal sacrifices, no offerings. The price is everything: repentance, self-sacrifice, proclamation.

This message is for us, too. Jesus, who we've heard about often but daily fail to follow properly, is alive and powerful and holy, and is willing and able to welcome us into God's presence. The price is nothing: no money, no taxes, no offerings. The price is everything: repentance, self-sacrifice, proclamation.

The way is the way Peter walked between today's two stories. When Jesus appears to Peter and the other followers, he shows them that he's alive, eats and drinks with them, teaches them, tells them to wait for the Spirit whom he'll send.

At this point in the church's year, we're between Easter and Pentecost, just as Jesus's followers were. But unlike them, we know what's coming: the great gift of the Holy Spirit.

This gift, building on the awesome experience of Jesus's resurrection, is what changes Peter from the passionate but inarticulate and impulsive man we see in the Gospels to the still-passionate but now powerful and inspiring man we see in Acts. He's the same person but refined and empowered by the Spirit.

The risen Christ appeared to His disciples on the road and in houses and by a lakeside. He appeared behind locked doors and no-one saw him come or go. But he touched the disciples, ate and drank with them, sat and taught them, and prepared them for what came next.

They'd spent three years following and learning from this man in the flesh. Now, after waiting for a little while for the Spirit, they'd spend decades following and learning from Him through that Spirit. They would now proclaim the good news of God's Kingdom themselves, heal the sick themselves, witness to the power of God's forgiveness themselves.

And this is where we are, too. Christ has appeared to us in churches and homes and mountainsides. None of us see Him come and go. But He has touched us and taught us and prepared us.

Through the Spirit, Jesus will refine us and empower us. Through the Spirit, God will renew us and make us more and more into the people we were created to be.

And, when we are filled with the Spirit once more, when we turn to God and ask forgiveness - we too will proclaim the good news of God's Kingdom, starting from Trumpington.