

Sermon for the 3rd Sunday of Easter, 14th April
By Rev Petra Elsmore

Gospel Reading

Luke 24:36-48

36 While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you.'

37 They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost.

38 He said to them, 'Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?

39 Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.'

40 And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet.

41 While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, 'Have you anything here to eat?'

42 They gave him a piece of broiled fish,

43 and he took it and ate in their presence.

44 Then he said to them, 'These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you-that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.'

45 Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures,

46 and he said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day,

47 and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

48 You are witnesses of these things.

Sermon

Last week I took Marcus and Lucy to Prague, to visit my dad and my family and just to have a few days away in a city which I love and which is especially beautiful during the spring.

We didn't get to go to church on Sunday, but we went into a park and sat on a bench and I used the App *Pray As You Go* and had about 20 minutes of listening to reflective music and being guided through a passage of scripture. And it was absolutely lovely, maybe it was the environment, sitting on the bench in the park on a lovely sunny morning, or perhaps it was doing things differently which gave me a sense of closeness to God. But it was one of those ordinary times, yet at the same time a moment of blessing.

During the Easter season, we move through the stories of Good Friday, Easter Day and then the post Easter encounters with Jesus and the forming of the early church fairly quickly. It's almost hard to imagine what it must have been like for Jesus's disciples, how much time did they have to come to terms with the shocking events of Jesus's death and resurrection? How much time did they get to process their emotions, and to get ready to face their future? They are rather unique, extraordinary experiences, of course, yet not impossible to relate to, as the

emotions the disciples experienced were very much human. Despair and hope.

Today's Gospel reading is the third of the stories of the risen Jesus appearing to his followers. It follows the theme of the past Sundays of how early Christian communities struggle to perceive and believe. More emotions come to front, a mixture of joy, disbelief, and wondering as they encounter the risen Christ.

In those stories which we read during the Easter Season, there is a lot to learn about being hopeful; there is a lot about the challenge of looking at life afresh and finding way forward.

Jesus appears to the disciples, and he says to them: "Peace be with you." He has a lot of convincing and calming to do, because they are terrified. He shows them his scars; "Touch me and see," he says, and then he eats fish in their presence. All this to help them to see and understand and to overcome their doubts. They have gone through a lot recently. No surprise they were terrified, struggling to believe that Jesus has risen from the dead. Struggling to take hold of hope, just after they have experienced the despair of watching him die on the cross, their dreams crushed, their friend and mentor, dying unbelievable brutal death. Even with the empty tomb, and the encounters some of them had with the risen Christ, it's no surprise that it was a struggle to grasp the hope which was right in front of them, that it was a struggle to let go of their fear, to overcome their doubts.

We are quite familiar with that fearful feeling, the struggle to hope in the light of painful and difficult experiences. How can one be hopeful for the future when we are daily confronted with the suffering world? For many life is full of struggle, a struggle to feed the family, battle with illness, or perhaps just feeling tired of trying to juggle too many jobs, too many responsibilities. Hope can sometimes feel like a too distant, too fragile almost out of reach possibility.

The disciples were only human, they had to come to terms with horrific experience and now they had to overcome their doubts, learn to trust and hope again.

The encounter is astonishing, Jesus says to them, "Touch me and see." He shows his scars, becomes vulnerable again, he eats in their presence. As they have done so many times before. The story is very evocative, you can almost feel the emotions, the fear, the wonder, the joy, the doubt, the hope. He then opens their minds and he reminds them what the scriptures say: The Son of Man is to suffer and rise from the dead on the third day and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

Jesus's disciples are transformed during this encounter. They are transformed from fearful and doubtful spectators to hopeful witnesses. All what they have experienced is valid. This encounter is a gift, an opportunity to question, to address their fears and doubts, to explore their understanding and to find ways forward in their growing faith.

These Easter stories are incredibly important for our own faith too.

For our own journeys when we allow ourselves, as we reconnect with those stories, to feel from time to time the raw emotions of despair and doubt, wonder and joy, trust and hope. These stories are important for us so that we can explore our own relationship with God and reflect how we are changed and transformed afresh, to ask again and again where our faith is taking us, what is asked of us.

So what is the state of our faith? When have we last experienced the mixture of doubt and wondering, joy and hope? Do we still expect to be astonished and surprised by Christ's presence among us, so much so, that we ponder afresh what he is asking of us?

We live in the world full of despair, that it is hard sometimes to hold on to the hope of the resurrection story, trusting that

Goodness is stronger than evil, love is stronger than hate, light is stronger than darkness, life is stronger than death, victory is ours through Him who loves us.

(We will say these words at the end of our Eucharistic prayer later on). Coming back to these Easter stories reminds us that we can indeed take hold of the hope which is offered to us.

And reconnecting with the astonishing encounter of Jesus with his disciples, where does it leave us?

I have mentioned how sitting on a park bench in Prague, listening to Sunday readings on the Pray as you go App was a moment of blessing for me last week.

Perhaps doing sometimes things differently is what it takes.

Or simply coming to God with an expectation and openness to hear from him. Asking what have you got for me today, God?

The Easter season is very good time to ask ourselves questions about our own journey with God. Following the steps of the disciples as they had to make sense of their relationship with Jesus and the implications of the events of Easter for their own life of faith.

In few weeks time I will invite you to join us for a course called Living Your Gifts. It is a five week course, essentially a discipleship course, exploring our place within God's community and the gifts and talents he has given us and how we can use them in the mission of the church.

It is easy to feel that we have done it all and there is not much more to learn, especially if you have been a Christian for a long time. But the exciting thing about God is that there is always something to learn and there is always something more to discover of our own journey with God and especially how this journey is to be shared with others. Watch the space.

So be encouraged through these Easter stories. Be encouraged to hope and be open to your own encounter with Jesus, be brave to acknowledge your doubts and fears, be ready to feel the wonder and joy afresh. Amen.

Closing Words

(Used at the Memorial service for the Rt Revd Dr Alan Wilson, Bishop of Buckingham, on Saturday 13 April at All Saints Church, High Wycombe; Words that Bishop Alan often used at his services, based on text from The Blue Mountains of China by Rudy Wiebe)

“In the kingdom of the Prince of Peace
you show wisdom by trusting people;
you handle leadership, by serving;
you handle offenders, by forgiving;
you handle money, by sharing;
you handle enemies, by loving;
and you handle violence by suffering
Because this is a Jesus society,
and you repent, not by feeling bad,
but by thinking different.”

Over to you.

This is the Way of Christ

We will walk in this Way together.

Thanks be to God.