

Scripture Readings for 15th April 2018

Luke 24:36-48

³⁶ While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." ³⁷ They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. ³⁸ He said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? ³⁹ Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have." ⁴⁰ When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet. ⁴¹ And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, "Do you have anything here to eat?" ⁴² They gave him a piece of broiled fish, ⁴³ and he took it and ate it in their presence.

⁴⁴ He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms."

⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. ⁴⁶ He told them, "This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷ and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹ I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

John 20:20-23

²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." ²² And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

Sermon: From Fear to Commissioned to Forgive

The resurrection of Jesus was disturbing and troubling for his closest followers, and it has been – and continues to be – equally challenging for *all* subsequent readers of the New Testament. We struggle to make sense of it, or to accommodate it, within our own modern ways of looking at the world. We just *can't* make it fit! But the gospel writers also knew of this problem because *what* they were describing didn't fit in with Jewish or Greek thinking either. So instead of simply dismissing the resurrection of Jesus out of hand, we need to appreciate that the gospel writers were describing a *unique* event, one which *defines* a *new* worldview. They don't, however, present a systematic metaphysical description of this new reality; they simply present the risen Christ. The paradigm they introduce is as radical as the Copernican Revolution, which challenged the way that we view the world by claiming that the earth moved around the sun, and not the other way around.¹

We heard last week of John's emphasis on the *physicality* of the risen Christ in his account of "doubting" Thomas. Jesus invited the skeptic to come and touch him, even his wounds of crucifixion, and so recognize that he was indeed the risen Lord. Luke does not present that story of Thomas. Just prior to our reading this morning, however, is the well-known story of the two disciples traveling on the road to Emmaus. Luke tells us that at the moment an apparent stranger gave thanks and broke bread, "their eyes were opened and they recognized Jesus, and then he disappeared from their sight. They asked each other: "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them assembled together . . ." ² This is the context of our gospel reading this morning, which, as we will see, has parallels with John's account from last week.³

Despite all that the disciples had heard from the women who visited the empty tomb earlier that Easter morning, and from the two from Emmaus, they were not prepared for the arrival of Jesus. Jesus comes to this secretive and scared group of his followers and says, "Peace be with you." Luke states their reaction plainly; "they were startled and frightened because they thought they were seeing a ghost."⁴ In other words, they did *not* think they were seeing an angel, but a spirit from the *dead*,⁵ which certainly would be a *real* cause for fear! Fear is the natural human response; it would be our response in such circumstances. Nevertheless, Luke makes it plain that the person they encounter is *not* a ghost, or a hallucination, and he insists on the reality of a bodily resurrection. Luke, like John, tells us Jesus invites the scrutiny: "*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."⁶ Moreover, it was a truism in

¹ The New Testament writers want to us realise the world moves around the Son! Incidentally, there was no experimental proof of the Copernican Revolution at the time it was proposed; in fact it took many *centuries* to prove it!

² Luke 24:31-33.

³ Specifically, John 20:19-23, but also 24-29.

⁴ Luke 24:37.

⁵ See 1 Sam 28:13-14.

⁶ Luke 24:39.

the ancient world that spirits were unable to eat or digest food. So Jesus, according to Luke, offers the second “proof” of *eating* fish in front of them.⁷ Let’s unpack this a little.

Some might be surprised to hear that the Christian faith does *not* embrace the Greek notion of the immortality of the soul, that is to say, that there is an indestructible element of human life, a soul or a spirit, which comes into the body at birth and returns to God after death. Yes, it is true there are many Christians who believe that “life after death” will be as an enduring spirit, and that “heaven” is therefore a purely non-physical existence in the presence of God. But this is *not* Jewish thinking. In fact there was division amongst the Jews in Luke’s day as to the reality of life after death.⁸ Nevertheless, the expectation among many was that of a final resurrection for the righteous in the fullness of God’s time. The radical claim of the New Testament writers was that Jesus was already “resurrected from the dead.” His body did not decay but was *transformed* and they were witnesses to *that* risen Christ. What this meant was they were actually seeing something many hoped for at the end of time, but had *unexpectedly* already happened to God’s Chosen One, Jesus.

What all this implies is that “life after death” means some kind of *embodied* life. This is, I think, one of the hardest things for us to grasp about the resurrection. St. Paul tried to thrash it out in 1 Corinthians 15, and even there it is not easy to understand. The contrast is *not* between a “physical” or “spiritual” body, but between a *corruptible* and *incorruptible* body.⁹ In other words, a body made from a material that is *not* subject to disease, death, and decay. This mystery doesn’t help our scientific sense of curiosity, of course, but it is consistent with the powerful [eschatological] notions of a “new creation” and a God who is “making all things new.”¹⁰ What the resurrection appearances seem to indicate is that Jesus’ new body was at home in both earth and heaven, so to speak. If our mental picture of “heaven” needs adjusting to follow this revolutionary impossibility, well, so be it! But this does provide a rationale for the otherwise very puzzling stories, both here in Luke and in John’s similar account. With their descriptions of a living, walking, conversing, and eating resurrected Christ, Luke and John put to rest any rumours of the risen Jesus being merely a disembodied spirit. Indeed, the second-century Bishop Ignatius tells his flock to “flee any who deny the reality of Christ’s resurrection body in favor of us purely spiritual Christ.” Whether we like it or not, Luke’s (and John’s) insistence of some kind of bodily resurrection may have been to counter those who either misunderstood the nature of the resurrection, or who thought that a spirit was deceiving them.¹¹ Either way, this apparent need to clarify the nature of the resurrection affirms its reality!

It is only after Jesus mitigates the fears and confusion of his followers that he then engages them with the Scriptures to open their minds. Minds cannot be opened when they’re trapped by fear. Our fears

⁷ See also John 21.

⁸ See Acts 23:8. The Sadducees did not believe an afterlife, nor the final resurrection.

⁹ 1 Cor 15:35-58.

¹⁰ See Isa 65:17; Rev 21:5, and 2 Cor 5:17.

¹¹ See also Acts 1:3; 10:40-41.

can hold us captive, making it difficult to give witness to the great joy that is ours knowing even death is not the final word. For those living in fear today, know that Jesus is alive, and because of that we have a firm hope and an awareness that God is still at work in the world. Closed minds *can* be opened! Although Luke does not cite specific passages or verses,¹² he stresses that only from a post-resurrection encounter with Jesus were his followers able to understand the Old Testament scriptures from this new perspective. Jesus did not launch into explanations about the mechanics of the resurrection, nor did he provide an itinerary of his whereabouts since Good Friday. He explained how his whole life, death, and resurrection were about what God is doing in the world reconciling the world to God. In going back to the scriptures, Jesus is saying, “It is *always* been about God, and God’s purposes for creation, namely, repentance that leads to forgiveness of sins and the wholeness of creation. Moreover, all the gospel writers insist on joining the crucifixion with the resurrection; to have the crucifixion without the resurrection is to rob the gospel of its hope and of the message that evil *has* been defeated, even natural evil with the ultimate redemption of creation. Moreover, we find that the crucifixion and resurrection become the centerpiece in the apostles’ preaching, to the incredulity of their audience, and so even the apostles knew that for many it was a stumbling block to faith!¹³ (So, nothing new there!) As Jesus explains the scriptures to his joyful, yet wondering, followers,¹⁴ he also emphasizes the need for “repentance,” that U-turn or a total change of mind that reminds us of John the Baptist. Moreover, there is stress on the *forgiveness of sins* that is to be proclaimed to *all the nations* with the express authority of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit.¹⁵ That same commissioning is found at the end of Matthew and John’s accounts.¹⁶

For John, our second reading, Jesus had always been on a divine mission – sent by the Father – and now he sends them. What he instructs his followers is stunning! “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”¹⁷ Wait a minute! They, like us, could have come back to him and said, “We thought that only God can forgive sins.” And that is true; but the message is simple: he is going to forgive sins *through* them! This is an overwhelming responsibility and not to be grasped in a power-hungry way – and that has happened at times in church history. At which point, any follower of Jesus should gulp and wonder if they were up to the task! But just prior to that command, we read, “Jesus breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’” This image of Jesus “breathing on” his followers and they receiving the divine Spirit is a powerful creative act of God – they become a new creation.¹⁸ This is a fulfilment of Ezekiel’s vision of the dry bones and the Spirit of God bringing them alive. The point of receiving the Holy Spirit is *not* to give the disciples a spiritual experience, although they will certainly have those, nor is it setting them

¹² If proof texts are sought, one could cite the suffering servant passages in Isaiah for confirmation that the Messiah had to suffer (Isa 52:13 – 53:12); Hos 6:1-2 for the resurrection on the third day, and Isa 49:6 for the preaching of repentance to all the nations. See also Luke 9:22, 44; 13:33; 17:25; 18:31–33.

¹³ 1 Cor 1:21-23.

¹⁴ Luke 24:41.

¹⁵ See Acts 2:29-36.

¹⁶ Matt 28: 6-20.

¹⁷ John 20:23.

¹⁸ See Gen 2:7, Exek 37:1-14.

apart from the ordinary people, a sort of “holier-than-thou” club. They are being divinely commissioned to do the kind of things that Jesus had been doing in Israel, and do it for the *whole* world. Luke and John agree: It is only because Christ’s followers have the Holy Spirit within them that they will be able to carry out their commission; they are not doing this on their own, but God’s powerful presence will be with them. Jesus knew that his message that offers forgiveness to “all the nations” would not fit in with the natural inclinations of his followers, and we see that reticence in Acts. He knew they needed divine assistance, the Holy Spirit, to lead them in that ongoing task of witness and proclamation of the reality of God’s Kingdom. And we still need that today.

This message of repentance and forgiveness of sins is not simply a matter for the individual, although they certainly are that, and is a feature of the Lord’s Prayer itself. It is an agenda which is needed to change the world. Our world is full of disputes and factions, large and small, economic and military. And all are wrapped up in stories of atrocities committed by opponents of one kind or another, resulting in a thirst for revenge and satisfaction. The only way forward is one that takes seriously repentance and forgiveness under the Lordship of the risen Jesus. The extraordinary work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa provided an example, one that other countries would do to follow.

Even though Luke and John have done what they can to present a bodily resurrected Christ, many struggle to find it credible in a scientific age and therefore find it a stumbling block to confident faith. But we need that for the commission we have inherited. Consequently, the movement from resurrection proofs in the gospels to divine commissioning is natural. The uniqueness of the Easter message is that it invariably *transforms* the lives of those who find themselves touched by it. After all, we are here today worshipping God on a *Sunday*, the day of resurrection, not a Friday – or the Sabbath. In all these things God’s action is emphasized. God saves, sends, and blesses.

In conclusion, what is shocking about all this for us today is that God *needs* us, Christ’s Church - and we *need* God. If we try to do everything by ourselves, we will eventually fail. Without the life-giving Holy Spirit the Church is dead. But God also has limited himself and needs us. If we do not take up that commission, there is much that God wants to do that will not be done. And one of the key things among them is that message of *forgiveness*. According to John, Christ’s Church is the agent of forgiveness. That “Shalom” – peace with God, each other, and with creation – is a key part of forgiveness – and makes the Church relevant and needed in every age. Amen.