

Sermon for Sunday 14 April 2024 – The Third Sunday of Easter

Revd Canon Simon Pitcher, Rector

Acts 3.12-19; Psalm 4; 1 John 3.1-7; Luke 24.36b-48

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy spirit. Amen. Please do be seated.

Many of you will be familiar with the tales of Borley Rectory. I remember my grandmother telling me, she was very excited about it, that it was the most haunted house in England. I remember her regaling me with tales of ghostly carriages and headless nuns and things that go bump in the night. Throughout history, ghostly tales of the supernatural have captured the human imagination, haven't they? In our gospel reading this morning, Luke tells us that Jesus himself stood among his disciples. Three days after they'd be witnesses to his death and his burial in a tomb, and they were startled and they were terrified, and they thought they were seeing a ghost. So the gospel reading begins with a sense of fear and darkness.

One of the big puzzles of the resurrection is that Jesus appears in bodily form, recognisable as Jesus. He speaks and can engage in conversation with his friends, and they're terrified. In order to prove that he is no ghost, he asks his friends if they have anything to eat, and they give to him a piece of broiled fish, and he eats it. As far as I know, no ghost has ever sat down to a fish supper. 'Then touch me and see', says Jesus, 'for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have'. And his body bears the marks of the crucifixion in his hands and his feet and his side. So clearly it's the same Jesus that the disciples knew before. Yet the gospel is making it very clear that the the body of Jesus, while not being a ghost, is different to how it was before. He appears in our gospel reading today in the room despite the locked door, and there's something new about him, something unlike anything that anyone has ever seen before. In verse 31, just before the reading that we had this morning, the risen Jesus had sat down to supper with two friends in the village of Emmaus, some miles away. He broke the bread, they recognised him, and then he vanished from their sight. Now suddenly, he appears in Jerusalem.

Later, the risen Jesus, the risen body of Jesus, will ascend and be taken into heaven. So clearly, the resurrection body of Jesus is different to the body that he had before his death on the cross and his burial. It's a new type of body, a spiritual risen body. It's very difficult for our minds and our imaginations to cope with that idea and to put our faith and our trust in that. What's that going to be like? What does it mean for Jesus to be different like that? 'Why are you frightened', asked Jesus; 'Why do doubts arise in your minds?' So again, this sense of fear. Why are you frightened? As Jesus speaks, the fear with which the disciples first reacted to him being with them is replaced; and fear has changed and suddenly while disbelieving, they're filled with joy. So the effect of meeting the risen Jesus is that fear is replaced with joy; fear replaced with joy. Bishop Tom Wright, in one of his commentaries, says that the risen body of Jesus is something new, a different substance to our mortal bodies. And he argues that God is the creator of all that we're familiar with in creation. Therefore, God is able to create a resurrection body in the same way

that he's created all life on this Earth, the bodies that we're familiar with, and that we too will receive a new resurrection body God will create for us, and that Jesus is the first example of what we will be.

St Paul says the same thing. In our second reading today, the writer of 1 John says that what we will be has yet to be revealed. St Paul says that Jesus is the first fruits, the example, of what we will be. And so St Paul writes, 'Someone will ask, how are the dead raised?' With what body will they come? How foolish. What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. When you sow, you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed, for example, wheat or something else. But God gives it a body as he has determined, and to each seed, he gives its own body. Not all flesh is the same. People have one kind of flesh, animals another, birds another, fish another. So there are heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, says St Paul. So he says it will be at the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown, are he buried, is perishable, but what is raised will be imperishable. Sown a natural body, raised a spiritual body. St Paul is able to write all that because he himself is writing from his own experience of meeting the risen Jesus on the Damascus road. So he describes Jesus as the first fruit, the first one who shows us how things will be. So fear, replaced with joy, death, replaced with new life.

And faith in the risen Jesus isn't just about hope in life after this one is over. I like the slogan of Christian aid, which is we believe in life before death. The risen Jesus is present and alive in this world through his Holy Spirit, and the Spirit's at work through his faithful people. So the living presence of Jesus is a different substance in this world, continually through the Holy Spirit, bringing joy where there is fear and where there is darkness. The first reading today we heard from the Book of Acts. And by this time, the risen Jesus had ascended into heaven, and the Holy Spirit of Jesus had been poured out onto the disciples. And one day, Peter and John come to the temple in Jerusalem to pray. And in the temple gateway, they meet a man who has been lame from birth, the man unable to walk. And as is his usual practice, he begs for some money.

And instead of money, Peter says to him, I have no silver or gold. What I have, I give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk. The man stands up, his legs find strength, and he walks. The passage that we heard from Acts this morning is what happens next. Everybody comes, the crowd comes to Peter and to John and they say, How did you do that? Whatever happened, how did you do that? The answer that Peter gives is that it was Jesus of Nazareth, by his spirit, who did that. It's a story about how the substance of the risen life of Jesus is at work in this world, transforming and renewing people's lives, leading people out of darkness into life, out of death, into the new life, changing the substance of this world. This is a story that shows how Christ is present, Christ living and active on both sides of the grave, the new life of Easter making a difference in this world now.

At the end of the gospel reading that we heard this morning, Jesus commands his disciples to take his message of repentance and forgiveness of sins and to proclaim it to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. And last week in his sermon, Pete told us how the disciples did exactly that. Repentance and forgiveness of sins is about life. It's about making all things new; it's about transforming the ways of this world into the substance of the life of heaven. So if you think about the dust and the rubble and the suffering of Gaza, the tension in the Holy Land today as missiles rain down. The new life of Jesus would

be found in that situation, wherever there is healing and forgiveness and new hope, wherever the Holy Spirit of the risen Jesus enables the substance of this world, which is horrible conflict and death and fear, to be transformed into joy and hope and life. If after this conflict that's to happen, there's going to be need for the repentance and forgiveness of sins. So we pray for that to be the case, for lasting peace and new life in that place. Again, if you think about the suffering caused by climate change, the new life of Jesus would be evident where the substance of the ways of this world are transformed from darkness and death and despair into new life and new hope and joy. In Kagera, for example, the money that we sent our Lent appeal, will help to restore damaged landscapes, grow new kinds of crops that are resistant to climate change, and help the church to provide education and medical care.

So again, through the Holy spirit, the substance of this world, which is about death and decay, becoming hope and life and joy. In our society, I guess, in our lives, wherever we too can be agents of the Holy Spirit in promoting friendship, forgiveness, kindness, restored relationships, wherever that there's anything broken, helping it to be healed, wherever we can support others with hope and love, we are allowing the Holy Spirit of the risen Jesus to work through us, to allow the substance of his risen life to work like yeast, transforming the dough of this worldly life. Rather than loneliness, isolation, selfishness, the church is about community, relationship, forgiveness, and joy.

So today the gospel begins with fear and darkness, and it ends with amazement and joy because the disciples just cannot imagine and get their heads around all the wonderful things that God has done through Jesus Christ. That is our Easter hope, that same sense of joy replacing fear, light replacing darkness, life replacing death.

In Jesus' name. Amen.