



Sunday Reflection

in the Charges of St Margarets, Renfrew
& St Johns, Johnstone



For Sunday 14 April 2024

Easter 3

The Curate will preach at St John's :-

Today we hear again a story of our risen Lord appearing to the disciples and we reflect of the significance of that transformative moment for ourselves and for the whole world.

***'You are witnesses of these things.'* (John 24.48)**

An illustration to set the scene

Seeing is believing! Or is it? Today's Gospel reading suggests that there is more to faith than this. Nonetheless, without eyewitness testimony to the resurrection, it is unimaginable that faith in Christ would have spread like wildfire and given rise to a new faith. Seeing is not sufficient for belief but faith depends, then as now, on eyewitness testimony.

The question of whether to understand the Gospel accounts literally or more symbolically is addressed head-on in a debate between two theologians, NT Wright and

Marcus Borg.¹ NT Wright is convinced that had there been a video camera in the tomb, it would have shown it to be empty. For Marcus Borg, who thinks that the story of the real-life Jesus was glossed by the early church to explain his significance, it doesn't matter, or rather that is not a necessary precondition of his faith. Either way, he believes that in Jesus God triumphed over death and brought about our salvation.

Both have faith, but it rests on very different understandings of what counts as evidence and truth.

Today's Gospel teaching

Today's Gospel follows immediately from Luke's account of the Supper at Emmaus where the risen Jesus joined the pilgrims on the road, explained the Scriptures about himself and was recognised by them when he broke bread at the supper table. That is what those pilgrims and the other disciples who were still left in Jerusalem were taking about when Jesus came among them and greeted them with the word of peace.

The account is very specific. Jesus speaks to them, shows them his (presumably still wounded) hands and feet and even eats a piece of fish. This is not some ethereal or purely spiritual presence.

But there's more. Jesus goes on to teach them, as he did on the road to Emmaus, the significance of what they are seeing. God has raised him from the dead. He is the Messiah. This is what the Scriptures have been about.

¹ Borg, Marcus and Wright, NT, *The Meaning of Jesus, two visions*. (Harper Collins,

Salvation has come for them and for all, and God's new age has begun.

Reflecting on the implications for our own lives

You are witnesses of these things. This is the hinge moment in Luke's account of the life of Jesus and the early church, the moment at which his second volume, the Book of Acts, effectively begins. For the faith to spread, it needs witnesses who have seen what has happened and understands what it means.

What was the witness they gave? What did they understood had happened? The earliest written account is given by St Paul in 1 Corinthians 15. It helps with what resurrection is.

Resurrection was not about a resuscitated dead body. Resurrection was a transformation of Jesus' physical body, not into a spiritual presence only, but a different physical state. St Paul writes of a 'spiritual body' but that really means a physical body, 'animated by spirit' (NT Wright), a soul-filled body. God has overcome death through Jesus giving up his life for us and that new life is now creatively at work in us and the world.

The truth to which the early church testified was that who Jesus was had not been killed and so the death of all created things is no longer the fate that awaits us. As the Easter anthem proclaims,

See yourselves therefore as dead to sin,
and alive to God in Jesus Christ our Lord.*

Jesus' resurrection showed him to be the Messiah and the last verses of our Gospel make clear what that means. This

is the climax of God's purpose for the world – the new age has begun. Those who witnessed the resurrection and those who heard and believed them had a new perspective on the world. They knew that the meaning and purpose of their lives was to turn to Christ and receive forgiveness, that the created world and the cosmos were destined for life not death. That's the message that Jesus gave them to proclaim,

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

It was this, rather than a promise of life after death, which fired people to believe and even to suffer torture and death to defend. Don't be told that the resurrection story is a pre-scientific myth. It was just as unexpected and shocking to 1st century Jews as to us. The Hellenes favoured the idea of spiritual life after death. The Pharisees proclaimed a physical resurrection, but as the restoration of a whole people, not the world-transforming event in one individual life. It's clear from the resurrection accounts that even the first witnesses could hardly believe what they were seeing with their own eyes.

NT Wright says this:

Early Christianity did not consist of a new spirituality or ethic. It consisted of an announcement of things that had happened.

And that's what can fire our mission too. For like those frightened disciples in Jerusalem we too:

Have known Christ among us when we gather

Have heard the words of Peace spoken

Have touched and seen the Lord in the Eucharist

And have had the Scriptures opened to us.
So, we are witnesses. We proclaim that our lives have been transformed by the fact of the resurrection and that we trust that we have been forgiven and redeemed. That we have hope for the world and are called to proclaim our Lord and Saviour to all.

'You are witnesses of these things.' (John 24.48)

and the Rector at St Margaret's :-

We reflect on the peace that Jesus brings as he appears to the disciples one last time before his ascension.

"Peace be with you." Luke 24:36

An illustration to set the scene

In 2006 the world was still reeling from the September 11 attacks that destroyed the World Trade Center.

It had changed people's perspectives on religion.

Airport security was ramped up, with new rules causing delays and frustration.

Since the perpetrators of the attack were Muslim terrorists, Islam was seen as a frightening and aggressive threat.

In January of 2006, the United States Peace Institute published an article called "**Religious Contributions to Peacemaking: when religion brings peace, not war**".

It addresses the world's preoccupation with the dangers of religious extremism and conflict between religious communities, particularly among the Abrahamic faiths: Islam, Christianity and Judaism.

It also highlights another side to the religious story, explaining that the contribution that religion can make to peace-making – the flipside of religious conflict – is only beginning to be explored.

It describes cases of mediation and peace-making by religious leaders and institutions.

Examples are the *World Council of Churches* and the *All Africa Conference of Churches*, which mediated the short-lived 1972 peace agreement in Sudan, and the successful mediation that the Rome-based Community of Sant'Egidio achieved in 1992, to help end the civil war in Mozambique.

Today's Gospel teaching

Today's Gospel is at the very end of the story of Jesus' presence on earth.

The disciples have been discussing his resurrection and the appearances he has made, when suddenly he appears among them.

His first words to them are **"Peace be with you."**

Even so, they are terrified and think they must be seeing a ghost.

In some ways it's a curious reaction, given what they have just been talking about.

Jesus is kind to them in their fear and reassures them that he is no ghost by encouraging them to touch him and by eating a piece of fish.

He goes on to help them understand the meaning of the Old Testament scriptures, which describe the death and resurrection of the promised Messiah, exactly as it has happened to him.

His last instruction to his friends is to wait in the city until they are clothed with power from on high.

The story of Jesus' time on earth will reach its conclusion in the next few verses, as they go out to Bethany and Jesus ascends to heaven.

How can we apply the teaching to our own lives?

Although the disciples are to wait for power – the Holy Spirit – all of this is set in the context of peace.

“Peace be with you” are Jesus' very first words as he appears among them.

He came to bring peace and the power that the Holy Spirit brings is to enable the disciples, and us, to spread that peace across the whole world.

The life, death and resurrection of Jesus bring new possibilities for peace with God and our neighbour.

And yet, how often religion is accused of being the cause of wars and conflict.

But Jesus did not say, "*You must persuade everyone to believe exactly as you believe and if they refuse you should persecute and fight with them until they do.*"

Rather, he proclaimed peace as fundamental.

He sends us out to proclaim repentance and forgiveness.

Surely his message is to repent, or turn away, from hostility and conflict and forgive one another for the harm we have caused.

You may be thinking that in some circumstances these are hard, if not impossible, tasks.

But God has sent the Holy Spirit to make the impossible possible.

This is the good news of the Gospel.

The United States Peace Institute's article describes the positive role that we can play and encourages us to work towards the peace that is at the heart of the Christian faith.

It is easy to become discouraged when we see religious people creating conflict in the name of faith, but the words of the risen Saviour give us courage to put aside doubt and to work tirelessly to see Christ's peaceable kingdom expand across the world.

Sometimes we may be able to make a difference to large groups or countries, like the *World Council of Churches* in Sudan or the *Community of Sant'Egidio* in Mozambique, but influencing just one or two people is equally valuable to

God, and we can all achieve that in the power of the Holy Spirit.

"Peace be with you." Luke 24:36

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