witnessing to hope

Sermon: St Mary Islington, 11:00am service, April 14th 2024.

Scripture: Acts 3:12-19; Luke 24:36-48.

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**Alleluia, Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia!**

That’s a pretty amazing claim.

As Christians is it our central belief. It is so central that Paul teaches us in his letter to the church at Corinth – “And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith”. But what does it actually mean to affirm that Jesus has been raised? What did the resurrection mean to the disciples and what can it mean for us? That’s quite a big ‘exam question’, which I don’t aim to try and answer fully this morning, but I hope to provide some reflections.

Our Gospel passage is set on the evening of the first Easter Day. And what a day it has been! In Luke’s account, the day starts with some of Jesus’ women followers going to the tomb in the morning. They find the stone rolled back, and two men in dazzling clothes announce that Jesus has been raised. The women return and report the news to the disciples, but they are not believed. Peter, though, goes to the tomb and confirms that it is empty. Later in the day, two of Jesus’ followers, traveling to Emmaus meet, but do not initially recognize, Jesus. They invite him to eat with them and during the meal Jesus blesses and breaks some bread. They then recognize Him, but he vanishes. At this point, overwhelmed by their experience, they rush back to Jerusalem and tell the rest of Jesus’ followers what has happened, to discover that Jesus had also appeared to Simon.

For his followers, the days after Jesus’ crucifixion must have been a mixture of emotions, with fear a predominant one. They had fled after Jesus’ arrest and were strikingly absent at the foot of the cross, with some honourable exceptions, notably the women. I think we can imagine them kind of in the shadows, trying to stay under the radar and out of sight in case they meet a similar fate.

And now there are hints, indications, clues that something miraculous has happened - an empty tomb and not one but two sightings of Jesus. “The Lord is risen”! They announce to the travelers returning from Emmaus.

Together, the disciples seem to be grappling with what the evidence of the risen Jesus means. What is the significance of how Jesus opened the scriptures to the two companions travelling to Emmaus? What did it mean that they recognized Jesus when he broke the bread? I’m curious about Jesus’ appearance to Peter. It happens ‘offstage’ and we have no description of it – Luke just tells us that it has happened.

There seems to be a dawning realization that Jesus has returned to them, but it is not clear to his followers what this means or how they should respond. We know that not only had Jesus returned to them, but that he would be a powerful, on-going presence. And this would transform them from a cowering and, let’s be honest, a pretty cowardly bunch, into the confident proclaimers of the Word that we find in Acts, for example in our first reading this morning. However, this was not an instant transformation.

So, going back to our Gospel reading. The disciples are increasingly convinced that Jesus has been raised but they are in a state of confusion, which they are trying to process. In the middle of their discussions, Jesus appears. As they are all ‘swapping notes’, He appears - suddenly, from nowhere, he is there, with them, in the room. We are told that they were “startled and terrified” and thought that they were “seeing a ghost.” To convince them that he is indeed really present, Jesus does two things – he shows them his hands and feet as a demonstration of his crucified body. Then he asks for something to eat and when provided with a piece of fish, he eats it in front of them.

Luke’s emphasis on the physicality of the resurrected Jesus makes the point that Jesus is really real and truly alive! However, I would like to focus on what Jesus comes on to say. He reinforces how his suffering, death, and resurrection are part of God’s plan and design, and that in his life the reality of that plan is revealed. And then he says “You are witnesses to these things”.

I think it is helpful to consider two meanings of the word witness. Firstly, a witness is simply someone who has seen or observed something. Secondly, however, a witness can be someone who testifies, sharing or making things known – knowledge, beliefs or conviction. The original disciples were certainly the first of these meanings – they had seen and observed Jesus’ death and resurrection. The question at this point in Luke’s narrative is - were they going to become the second meaning of witness? What would be their response to all that they had seen and heard? And how would this change come about. The verse following our reading starts to provide an answer to the ‘how’ question. In verse 49 we read:

“And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high”.

Luke, here, is looking forward to Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit who will enable and embolden the disciples.

To start answering the ‘what’ question, let us now turn to our reading from Acts.

In our reading, Peter is interpreting some dramatic events that have just occurred. In the preceding verses Peter has entered the temple courts with John to pray. A man who was born lame asks them for money. Instead of giving him money, Peter miraculously heals the man in Jesus’ name, astonishing everyone there.

At the start of our reading, Peter is preaching to the crowd. As he begins, Peter emphasizes that the healing power he has demonstrated is not his, but Jesus’ – Jesus, the resurrected Jesus, is a continuing and ongoing presence and he, Peter, is a witness to this. In short, Peter is saying, we are not the story here. And for that matter, neither really is the healed man. The bigger story is about God and his servant Jesus. The God who has raised Jesus, who was crucified.

Peter then calls his listeners to repentance. As many preachers in this church have pointed out, the word translated as “repent” is better translated as “a change of mind or heart”. Peter sets out the results of this change. In verse 19 we read that “sins are wiped out” and if we read on into the next couple of verses this erasing of sins brings about a refreshment in the Lord and Christ’s eventual return. The experience of the healed man offers a kind of sneak peek at a more hopeful future, which verse 31 calls “the time of universal restoration”.

So, the ‘what’ of witnessing to the resurrection seems clear here. Peter’s response is to share the love of God by healing in Jesus’s name and then to proclaim the Good News. And we get a sense that witnessing involves change in some way, that participating in witnessing changes us … participating, sharing, proclaiming.

In our Gospel reading Jesus reminds his disciples that his suffering, death, and resurrection are all part of God’s design and God’s intentions humankind.

Peter’s sermon in Acts seems to point us forward to think about the resurrection in terms of refreshment and restoration. Verse 15 uses an interesting title for Jesus – Peter calls him “The Author of Life”. “Author” here means originator or founder. This title puts the resurrection into that wider framework of God’s designs. It suggests that we can think about Jesus’ resurrection being not just about victory over death (important though that is), or even about new life in Jesus (important also), but about a fullness and abundance and flourishing of that new life. And in Acts, as we will see over the coming weeks, the resurrection is the start of a new community with a flourishing new rhythm of life. And a life radically different to the life of the world around them. We go on to see the new followers of Jesus give up ownership of personal possessions and own everything in common, for example, and we see the new church grow as many people join the emerging community. This was a radically flourishing life, kick-started by those early witnesses to the resurrection.

We have been considering two linked questions. What does it mean to affirm that Jesus is risen and what does it mean to be a witness to this?

I suggest that our readings today encourage us to think of the risen Jesus as the source of all that is flourishing. To say “He is Risen” is to affirm that, in Jesus, new life is possible and that change is possible. As an Easter people, we are a hopeful people. And this is the hope that we welcome Catherine into today, through your baptism. May that everlasting hope bring joy to you and your family.

The original followers of Jesus were witnesses to the hope of the resurrection and the abundant life that it released. Their bearing witness brought about a change in their hearts and this was evidenced by a change in their lives. They were made different by becoming followers of Jesus. For Peter, his response was to share and proclaim the Good News. What is our equivalent? What can “bearing witness” mean for us? If the resurrection is about a fullness and flourishing of life, how can we witness to it by participating in, sharing and proclaiming Jesus’ picture of abundant life. And if we do that, how might we be changed?

# Amen.