

## Sunday 8<sup>th</sup> May 2022 Easter 4 - Acts 9: 1-20 and John 21: 1-19

### It was outside their own experience!

Rev David Coster

For over 65 years I have read or listened to the events of Easter and Post Easter as recorded in the New Testament. And as I read them again this year, it struck me that there is, somehow, always a freshness about them and a sense of the surprising and the unexpected.

I wonder if that is how it is for you, or is it that you have heard the accounts so often that you slip into a trance like state questioning whether the events really occurred the way the authors recorded them, for as we all know, they speak of events that we have never witnessed.

I was talking to a colleague this week who told me that one of our Ministers preached this last Easter that all of the Easter events recorded are really parable (a simple story told to illustrate a spiritual lesson – a little like allegory) rather than historical fact. My friend and I were of the opinion that the Easter and Post Easter events record the experience of the disciples and the fact that they did not know what to make of that which they were experiencing. Their experience of the Post Resurrection events was so outside their realm of comprehension and experience that they had no idea whatsoever to make of them.

There big question was, “What is happening here?”

So let us look at our readings for today and see what we can make of them.

In his book “Read Mark and think about it,” our friend the late Rev Ivan Pierce wrote, “At last the disciples find out for themselves what the others had experienced. Jesus appeared among them when they were having a meal together. The writer says they were ‘scolded’ for their lack of faith and stubborn rejection of the testimony given to them, because it was **outside their own experience**.” Ivan went on to say, “I think the writer is being rather heavy-handed, for it would be uncharacteristic of Jesus to scold them unless he did it with his ‘tongue in his cheek’ teasing them good-naturedly. After all, the re-union would be a happy one however amazing.”

I think we have to take particular note of what our friend Ivan is writing here of these Post Resurrection events. He described these events as outside the disciples’ own experience and amazing. That is the reaction of we 21<sup>st</sup> century scientifically aware people, as well as the reaction of the first disciples in 1<sup>st</sup> century Galilee.

There are some important details to note in John’s post resurrection account of Jesus’ encounter with his disciples.

There are echoes and threads of earlier events in the lives of the disciples when Jesus was with them in human form.

1. The charcoal BBQ fire on the beach and the charcoal BBQ fire in the Courtyard on the night of Jesus’ arrest.
2. The disciples in their boats with their nets taking us back to the day when Jesus called them to come follow him. Here the words are “Come, eat with me.”
3. The open-air breakfast on the beach hinting at the feeding of the 5,000.
4. Jesus hands the bread to his friends, stirring memories in them on the night on which he was arrested, having handed around to them on that night bread and wine.
5. The number of fish (one for every nation of the world known at that time) symbolizes the all-encompassing nature of God’s love in Jesus for everyone.

When we come to our Acts reading, we find Saul the greatest persecutor of the Church – a man on a mission which he believed to be from God to eradicate the followers of Jesus and the destroy the Church of Jesus Christ.

In his eagerness to be a champion of God, Saul shoots off down a road that literally blinds him to what God is doing. Saul's vision is narrowed by his focus on getting other people to do things (ie live out their faith) in the way Saul thought they should.

The Risen Jesus meets him and Saul falls to the ground blinded by the light. Listen to what Luke says is the reaction of those travelling with Saul (who became the Apostle Paul). He said those with Saul "stood speechless."

Have you ever been in a situation where you are so amazed, so dumbfounded, so shocked that you have stood speechless?

That is how it is for these people with Saul. They have no idea what is happening. It is so far outside their experience that they are left in a state of total confusion.

So, what are we to make of these Post Resurrection appearances? In 2012 I quoted a blog of the Rev Martin Stewart. I want to quote it again, for I believe Martin answers the question I have just posed. This is what Martin wrote:

"This side of Easter, we are in the business of living out what it means that God raised Jesus. I would venture to say that whatever the church thinks its business is, this 'living out what it means that God raised Jesus' has to be at the core of what we do. Let me expand on that a little. God having raised Jesus means this to me:

1. God does things;
2. Death and all its cousins – fear, hopelessness, defeat, apathy, anxiety, doubt, and despair (to name a few), could not stop God doing things;
3. God does not fit our boundaries – resurrection was a boundary defying event;
4. Even though he looked and acted differently in his resurrected state, God did something bodily with Jesus;
5. Because God did this, resurrection now becomes a category of possibility for us – by this I mean that we should not be surprised if still God raises things;
6. The Risen Jesus hasn't been crucified again – in other words he still lives;
7. We don't know a whole lot about how he lives – but we do get glimpses of him... and there are many who have gone before us who have stories to tell of this... John Wesley's heart strangely warmed, Dietrich Bonhoeffer's courage, Martin Luther King's vision, Mother Theresa's self-sacrifice, and so on
8. We also receive these glimpses of him in our journeys of faith, in our experiences of God speaking to us even if they are hard to explain;
9. Jesus' living means that he pops up all over the place... we don't hold him, we don't have his measure, we can't limit the ways he is at work, he is present with us and despite us... his generosity, his grace, his love, his capacity to forgive and raise up... they are without limit...
10. The church has to constantly re-learn what it means that God raised Jesus. The church often behaves as if it is the bearer of God's life in the world... we behave as if you have to come in here to get God, and worse, that God's mission is defined by what we do. Archbishop Rowan Williams makes a useful statement, "It is not the church of God that has a mission. It's the God of mission who has a church."
11. We are in the business of living out what it means that God raised Jesus. In this new framework of understanding the church has to find its way on the strange ground of knowing enough to know. We don't know everything. We can't explain everything. We can't explain resurrection very easily, nor can we explain it away. But what God is doing is not limited by our intellectual struggles. What God is doing wraps us up into it... we are caught up and embraced and called to live into it. This is big!"