**Sermon: Sunday 14th April – Easter 3B**

Have you ever thought about how many meals feature in the gospels? They are a very central part of the ministry of Jesus. Some meals get him into trouble, as when he chooses to eat with ‘sinners’ and outcasts – an aspect of Jesus’ ministry which, personally, I think is beautiful. Other meals are signs of God’s abundant generosity, such as when Jesus feeds the five thousand by taking what is available and blesses, breaks, and distributes it until all are fed. On Maundy Thursday, we remembered Jesus last evening of fellowship with his disciples, which, as we know, also centred around a meal.

Have you noticed that many of the *post-Easter* stories about the resurrected Jesus also involve meals? Those of you know the beautiful story of the Emmaus journey might recall that the two disciples who found themselves walking alongside Jesus did not know who he was until they recognised him in the breaking of the bread. In today’s reading from the gospel of Luke, Jesus comes among the disciples and shows his risen humanity by eating a piece of cooked fish. In John’s gospel, Jesus shares another meal of fish with his disciples – cooking them breakfast on the beach, early in the morning. What are we to make of all these accounts? What stands out for you?

This morning I would like to speak about two ways in which we might approach the post-resurrection narratives. Please don’t think of these as being exhaustive. Both approaches I am going to suggest have their place, but they are quite different, so one is more likely to appeal to you than the other, at least today. You might come back to the other approach some other time. The first is to try to *understand* what occurred – to *think* about the claims the gospel writers, and later, Paul, makes about Jesus’ resurrection, and to explore different interpretations that theologians present us with. The second approach is more *personal and relational* – for us to read and enter into these narratives about the disciples’ encounters with Jesus, so that we may respond to him from our hearts. These approaches are rarely completely distinct from one another – in my experience one is quite likely to lead to the other.

Let’s have a little go, at the intellectual approach. First, it is important to acknowledge that there is no record of the actual resurrection event itself in the gospels. Rather, the gospels report what occurred before and after the resurrection. What seems to be significant to the gospel writers is the great *change* that occurred. The gospels themselves certainly do not attempt to prove or explain the resurrection. Rather, they describe the huge impact that encountering the risen Jesus had on those who met him.

Not being a repeatable event, the resurrection is also not something that can be “proved” by scientific method. It’s quite natural that, right from the beginning, and over the centuries, speculation and suspicion about Jesus’ resurrection has arisen. I know that some of you will be familiar with some alternative theories about the resurrection, such as: Jesus hadn’t really died, or the disciples were hallucinating, or the authorities had taken away the body. If you are interested in reading about those, and Christian responses to those speculations, I can recommend a few pages from this book by David Watson and Simon Jenkins. I have photocopied a few copies of these, which I have left on a chair in the foyer.

I have also given Hamish a one-page handout to share with the folk at Forum on Tuesday, written recently by a contemporary theologian, Rev Dr Alister McGrath. In it, he counters the more recent objection that “the resurrection was really a symbolic event, which the first Christians confused with an historical event on account of their uncritical presuppositions.” I thought it better not to attempt to summarise his arguments for this sermon, because his writing is complex, and difficult to make simpler! **Rev Dr Alister McGrath** holds the Andreas Idreos Professorship in Science and Religion in the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the University of Oxford, and holds three doctorates from the University of Oxford, covering Science, Theology and their relationship. It’s encouraging to know that people of such intelligence and erudition have closely considered the resurrection and not found it “beyond belief”.

I *would* like to share with you a couple of paragraphs from the writing of NT Wright, English New Testament scholar, and Anglican bishop. He was the bishop of Durham from 2003 to 2010. I’d like to read you a short extract from a recent article in which he comments on Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances, including the one we read about today. This might give you a little flavour of recent scholarship.

NT Wright:

*People sometimes suggest that Luke and John … were at pains to make Jesus’ resurrection appearances more ‘physical’ than they actually had been, to combat the view that Jesus wasn’t truly human but only ‘seemed’ to be (the heresy known as ‘Docetism’). Frankly, if that was what Luke was trying to do, he made a very botched job of it. For Jesus to be touched, and to eat broiled fish, is one thing. Appearing through locked doors, disappearing after breaking bread at Emmaus, and finally withdrawing into God’s heavenly dimension – not of this strikes one as immediately useful in a fight against Docetism.*

*The real explanation is stranger, and is backed up with evidence of various kinds. The disciples were confronted with a new form of reality, for which they were unprepared, but for which the language of resurrection (not of ghosts, or of mere resuscitations) was available. Jesus, they believed, had gone through death and out the other side into a new mode of life. This was, naturally enough, difficult to describe, but it seems to have involved his physical body being transformed so that it was now inhabiting both our space and God’s space.*

And this is where we come to the impact of encounter – of experience, which goes beyond our understanding. In today’s account of Jesus’ appearance to a group of disciples, a number of reactions are recorded. The disiplces were terrified, alarmned, full of doubts, unable to believe, and *also* full of joy and wonder. What a mix of emotions. Jesus opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, particularly those which pointed to himself. And he commissioned that group of terrified, doubt-ridden followers to go out and preach about repentance and forgiveness, witnessing to what they had seen and experienced. Isn’t it amazing that Jesus trusted them to do it.

And, amazingly, following Pentecost, they actually did do it – as we read in Acts 3. Peter, who had denied knowing Jesus, is out there preaching that message of repentance, forgiveness, healing, and the restoration of all things, in the name of Jesus, as Jesus had commanded. Wonderful!

Those to whom Jesus appeared clearly struggled to comprehend what had occurred. But they were prepared to witness to what they had seen, and to what they understood.

***PHILIP YANCEY***[*https://philipyancey.com/a-world-without-easter*](https://philipyancey.com/a-world-without-easter)

*Blog March 24, 2024 – Extract*

*Fast forward two thousand years. Today three billion people around the world identify as followers of Jesus. The message he brought has spread to Europe, Asia, and every other continent. The chances of that happening without the jolting event we celebrate as Easter are vanishingly small. Before his resurrection, Jesus’ few followers were denying him and hiding from the temple police. Even afterward, Thomas doubted until he saw proof in flesh and scars. Something happened to give the disciples a glimpse of Jesus’ cosmic view.*

Much about the resurrection remains a mystery. What we are given in Scripture is a series of stories of Jesus’ transformative engagement with individuals. And this brings us to the second way in which we might respond to the resurrection narratives – a rather more personal and relational way – to sit with just one of the gospel stories, and endeavour to place ourselves within the story.

Yesterday I watched, on YouTube, an interesting conversation between Rowan Williams (the former Archbishop of Canterbury, and Honorary Professor of Contemporary Christian Thought at Cambridge University) and Paula Gooder (who is the Chancellor of St Paul’s Cathedral and a leading Biblical scholar). It was recorded after Easter in 2021, as the UK was emerging from lockdown. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9wLxMSppSMk&t=1547s>

It was a conversation of great theological depth, but what I found particularly interesting was that during the conversation the speakers asked one another about their favourite post-resurrection narratives. For Paula Gooder it was the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus, who did not at first recognise Jesus, until he broke bread with them. For Rowan Williams it was the account of Mary Magdalene meeting Jesus in the early morning outside the empty tomb. You will probably recall, that when Jesus first appeared, Mary Magdalene thought he must be a gardener. But when Jesus speaks her name – “Mary” – she immediately recognises him. Rowan Williams spoke about his response to this story: “The recognition happens in that moment, when her name is spoken. To me that is so central to Christian faith, that in the presence of Christ you know that you are known, you know that who you uniquely are is seen by God, and welcomed and affirmed by God, and that’s what God works with and transfigures. And that’s why, I take it, that story is as simple and profound as it is.” It’s clear that this systematic theologian has also spent a lot of time praying with the gospels on a personal level.

My own favourite? Ask me at morning tea!

Can I suggest today, that we might all make some time to engage with the gospel accounts of the resurrection – with our minds or hearts, or both. And in this Easter season, this season of new beginnings, let us reflect on what needs to start afresh in our lives, in light of the great love and power of God, revealed through the resurrection of his Son.

**Celtic blessing**

Deep peace of the running wave to you.
Deep peace of the flowing air to you.
Deep peace of the quiet earth to you.
Deep peace of the shining stars to you.
Deep peace of the gentle night to you.

Moon and stars pour their healing light on you.
Deep peace of Christ,
of Christ the light of the world to you.
Deep peace of Christ to you.