14th April Sermon

The holy gospel according to Luke chapter 24: 36b-48

Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” **37**They were startled and terrified and thought that they were seeing a ghost. **38**He said to them, “Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? **39**Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see, for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” **40**And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. **41**Yet for all their joy they were still disbelieving and wondering, and he said to them, “Have you anything here to eat?” **42**They gave him a piece of broiled fish, **43**and he took it and ate in their presence.

**44**Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.” **45**Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, **46**and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day **47**and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. **48**You are witnesses of these things.

The question I had this week was how am I supposed to preach on the resurrection two weeks after Easter? The anticipation and excitement Gillian has built up during the Lenten season is gone, making it difficult to recreate the same level of interest and expectation without recreating Easter.

Let’s briefly reflect on the events earlier on that day to understand this reading’s significance. On this third day, the day of resurrection, early at dawn Mary Magdalene and others went to the tomb for processing the deceased body.  But they found the stone already rolled away from the tomb, and when they went in, the body was gone. While they were perplexed about this, two men in dazzling white appeared.  The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here but has risen.  Then she saw Jesus outside the tomb, and returning from the tomb she told the eleven disciples about it.  As you can imagine, these words seemed just a little farfetched.  It was probably regarded by what we would call nowadays “Fake News”. So, Peter ran to the tomb, and finding just the pile of clothes, he went back home amazed.

Later that afternoon, two of the disciples were leaving Jerusalem, and while discussing the extraordinary events of the past weekend the disciples were in a gloomy mood, having lost their hopes that Jesus would be the one to deliver Israel. He was thought to be the Messiah with whose help it was hoped that Judea might become wholly independent of foreign powers. But sadly, he was gone. Then they encountered Jesus but didn’t recognise him.

Jesus asked them about the events that they were discussing. One of them asked, “are you the only stranger that doesn’t know the things that have taken place this last weekend?” Of course, they told him what had happened in Jerusalem, and how the tomb was now thought to be empty. As they returned home, they had convinced themselves that the women’s report of the risen Christ was more than likely, a load of old cobblers.

Because it was getting dark, they invited this stranger to eat and stay with them, and it was in the act of breaking of the bread that they realized they had been speaking with the risen Jesus. Then he disappeared! As a result, the two disciples hurriedly returned to Jerusalem (a distance of 20 miles) where they excitedly told the other disciples what had happened to them.

It is at this moment that today’s text begins. The disciples on hearing the news were in a fearful retreat, in what was to be a clandestine meeting. It was the evening of the day of resurrection. We know from John’s Gospel that the Disciples were huddled in a bolted room, dominated by their fear of authorities, and with jolly good reason. Their fear of an uncertain future was a perfectly natural and understandable reaction, because they lived in such violent and difficult times under Roman rule, which was traditionally maintained by brutal oppression. Just two days ago they had seen their leader violently put to death. Naturally, their current and realistic fear was that if Jesus was so despised by the Jews that they got the Romans to get rid of him, what then was likely to happen to them?

Sadly, to this day there are still Christians in countries who worship behind closed doors in fear of reprisal. We are very fortunate to live in a free country.

Ours is a country where you can worship any form of religion you like. Well, not quite, because I think our Government might take exception to the Druid’s ancient niceties of human sacrifice! I think they might draw the line at that one!

However, the resurrected Christ appeared, miraculously overcoming any obstacle such as a locked door! Jesus’ appearance carried with it the marks of revelation, commission, and empowerment. Firstly, in response to his disciples’ fears, he calmed the situation with reassurance. Jesus’ first words were “Peace be with you”, which was intended as an antidote to their anxiety.

They had thought they were seeing a ghost, and they were justifiably terrified with fear. This must have been confusing, because they had seen his death, and normally, dead stuff is supposed to stay dead! Yet here Jesus was, resurrected.

Luke went to extraordinary lengths to assert the fact that the appearance of the resurrected Christ was no disembodied spirit. Jesus was not a ghost; he was a real person.

The resurrected Christ had a body, and even if contemporary believers cannot embrace Jesus as his disciples did, we can still bear witness to more than a spiritualized, demythologized Christ.

Jesus then did two things. He offered his hands and feet for examination by the disciples. To shed this ghostly perspective Jesus said, “Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself.” Then he ate a piece of fish in their presence. The two actions were clearly intended to dispel any notion the risen Jesus was a figment of their imagination. The showing of his wounds may have helped settling their fears and furthermore a ghost would hardly eat fish.

Jesus then effectively commissioned them to bear witness to his life, ministry, and resurrection. In fact, the impact of what happened in this short reading is stunning.  The disciples were effectively commissioned to spread the story of the risen Jesus, which can lead to a change of mind and a proclamation that in Christ all believers would find forgiveness. Think of it: what this means is that we too, as latter-day followers of Jesus are charged with grasping how all things come together in Jesus. So often—especially in our soundbite era—some people tend to reduce the Christian faith and our practice of it to slogans and bumper stickers. But the story is so much bigger than this.  Jesus is Lord.  Jesus is King.

And the reason he is King and Lord is because even now he is “seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty” (as we say in reciting the creed each Sunday).

Many people these days, who are paranoid about scams, might cast a suspicious eye on this story. But this brief passage from Luke 24 reminds us that there can be no substitute for the genuine good news of Jesus Christ, which is universal in its scope and particular in its articulation. We are encouraged to understand that the blessings of God in Jesus Christ easily transcend any racial, ethnic or gendered prejudice. It is true, as Christians, we can be tempted to look at non-Christians with sadness because they are so afraid of being taken in that they cannot be taken out of their own secular beliefs, thus they are missing out on the joy and freedom afforded us by the history that followed that empty tomb.

Easter, the resurrection, who Jesus is and what he means to us: these are not small matters that we can easily understand or wrap our minds around in an instant.  These are matters that should generate wonder and enthusiasm.

We are asked to accept, with thanksgiving and praise, the gifts of life and faith we receive from God through his grace, and mercy. Also, we are offered the eternal reality of a risen and living Savior, and a powerful and active Holy Spirit. Thanks be to God that this is so!

Amen