

*Fully alive*

This morning we continue in this Easter season, as our readings take us back once again to the extraordinary events that shook Jerusalem in the days and weeks after Jesus's resurrection from the dead. And for the third week running we focus on one of Jesus's resurrection appearances. Here again we are presented with one of these strange encounters between a Christ who is clearly the same Jesus, the same Lord who the disciples had known and followed before his cruel and violent death, and yet who is mysteriously transformed by his resurrection, not always immediately recognisable and likely to appear without warning in the disciples' midst and just as quickly and inexplicably disappear. These are strange accounts that leave us mystified as to what was actually happening and what it would have been like to have been there and to meet with this risen, elusive Lord. And what can we learn from them? Other than sheer puzzlement at a Jesus who could come and go like this, appear and disappear, who was recognisable and yet unrecognisable, how can these stories edify and shape us as a Christian community?

Well, there are a number of things we notice. For a start, it's interesting how, especially in Luke's Gospel, Jesus' appearances are often associated with two things, and these are the opening up of the Scriptures and the sharing of food. That is evident in a previous story in Luke's Gospel when two disciples are walking to a town called Emmaus and a stranger joins them who – typically – they do not recognise. And we are told that as they walked he engaged in a walking Bible exposition with them, opening up the ancient Hebrew Scriptures and explaining how they all pointed to the events of the recent days and Jesus' death and resurrection. And then this little threesome stop at an inn and the stranger breaks bread with them and in that action they recognise Jesus – and then he's gone! And those two features – the explaining of the Scriptures and the sharing of food - are also central to today's reading from Luke, where Jesus eats in the disciples' presence and then we are told that 'he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures.' Again we have a combination of food for the mind and food for the body and they come together around the risen Lord. And that is why the preaching of the Word and the celebration of Holy Communion

with bread broken and wine shared are central to Christian worship. Here the risen Christ is present!

Now, this is significant because it shows that in his resurrection appearances, when Jesus met with his disciples, his focus was not particularly on life after death, on life in heaven, on what it will be like in the next life. He seems to have been more interested in this life, on where we would encounter him in this world, on where we would experience him here and on what the resurrection means for us now. And this is so important. People often refer to religion as ‘pie in the sky when you die’ as if we are preoccupied with the life to come, but nothing could be further from the truth. Yes, of course Jesus’ resurrection has implications for the life beyond this one, beyond the grave. But it also addresses us here and now and what it means to live the life of the resurrected in this world.

Let me put it this way. What Easter reveals to us is that death is not just something that happens to us when we die. Death is not just encountered when someone breathes their last breath. Rather death is a power that is at work throughout life. It’s a power that infects life and that stalks us and that seeks to squeeze life out of us. So death was at work in all the forces that combined to execute Jesus. Death was at work in the religious establishment that found him such a threat and determined to do away with him. And death was at work in the crowd who bayed for his blood. And death was at work in Pontius Pilate who gave in to the crowd. And in our reading from the Book of Acts today Peter refers to these forces that combined and conspired to do away with Jesus, and he also points to a lame man on whose life death had left its calling card. This man hadn’t actually died, but his life had been diminished by his lameness and he had been reduced to sitting on the street and begging for alms. But with Jesus’ resurrection the strongholds of death are being invaded and overthrown and so our verses from Acts are preceded by an account of this man’s healing, as suddenly he is walking and leaping and praising God. His life has been invaded by resurrection!

So resurrection is about the here and now as well as some future life and Jesus’ resurrection appearances are partly about commissioning his disciples to live the life of the risen. And there is something that I want you to notice about our reading this morning. I want you to notice how keen this passage is to emphasise how physical Jesus is in his resurrection, how resurrection is embodied in him. So Jesus emphasises strongly that he is not a ghost. Ghosts,

after all, seem to be very ethereal, disembodied things. You can often see through them apparently and they float and waft about. But Jesus says, 'touch me and see, for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.' He is physical, and what I love about this passage is that it is actually a celebration of the senses – all the senses are engaged here. Suddenly Jesus appears - in other words he is not just a presence, an intuited awareness, but he becomes visible. The disciples are told to 'Look at my hands and my feet' - in other words, use your eyes! And of course he is speaking and so the disciples are also listening, hearing once again that familiar voice, that Galilean accent, those distinctive cadences in which Jesus spoke. And then he says, 'touch and see...' – so yes, touch is there too. Touch his warm skin, feel the scars forming over his wounds. Then Jesus asks for something to eat and he is given broiled fish and I imagine maybe that the smell of fish hung in the air in that room where it had been cooked. And then there is taste, the distinctive flavour of broiled fish. Resurrection here is sensual, it is channelled through the senses and in this way life is enhanced and the world comes alive with Jesus.

This is part of what it means for the resurrection to be physical. It is God honouring his covenant with flesh and blood and bone, respecting the bond with the human body that he established at creation and that he renewed in the Incarnation when he took on flesh and came amongst us. I've heard far too many theologians try to explain the resurrection by saying that the disciples somehow became aware of a presence, that somehow in recalling their memories of Jesus it was as if he were there among them again, as in the old days in Galilee and they knew he'd always be with them. Well, sorry, this is resurrection on the cheap, resurrection on a calamitous exchange rate, offering little cash value. For the resurrection to be physical means that the resurrection is sensual and the senses, after all, are the portals into the joys of life.

One of the great sayings in the history of the church comes from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century Bishop of Lyon named Irenaeus who famously said that 'the glory of God is a human being fully alive.' This is what resurrection looks like, a human being fully alive, fully engaged with life, senses aroused and attuned to the wonder of the world. And be clear - we are not just talking here about youth and vitality and energy. I have met so many elderly people, people struggling with age and infirmity and disability and yet who are gloriously and wonderfully alive and alert and living embodiments of resurrection.

And this is something that goes beyond human life. There is one silly memory that stays with me and that comes back every Easter. Some years ago when I was ministering in London there was a sunrise Easter morning celebration in a park that I felt obliged to go along to, so I dutifully got up early and set off with our dog, a dear border collie called Holly. Well, when I got there I was somewhat underwhelmed. It was one of those occasions when a bunch of Christians were trying far too hard to be joyful and were completely missing the mark. It was forced and artificial and I felt tired and I wished I'd stayed in bed. Suddenly however I realised that Holly the dog was no longer with me. I scanned the park and then I caught sight of her in the distance. Holly the dog had met up with another dog and the two of them were chasing each other gleefully, racing around in circles, rolling and tumbling over one another, barking and playing together, in joyous celebration where we Christians were totally failing. The glory of God is all creation fully alive and rejoicing. Alleluia!

Some of you may have seen the film a few years ago, 'Chariots of Fire' about the athlete and missionary Eric Liddell who famously refused to run a race in the 1924 Olympic Games because it was held on a Sunday. There's a scene in that film when Liddell's sister is trying to dissuade him from pursuing his athletic career, arguing that he should go instead into full-time Christian service. And Liddell says to her – and I doubt he ever said this is real life, but it's a great line anyway – he says, 'but when I run I feel His pleasure!' There you have it: the body, the physical, the senses alive and exerting and straining to the glory of God!

Or think of it this way. There is a Jewish saying about the one question that God will ask us on the Day of Judgement. I wonder what you imagine might be the one question God will ask you on that day. I actually googled this and found that there is a whole lot of Muslim teachings and sayings on this question. So what is it to be? And you might think that God would ask us all sorts of earnest questions about our sins and our failures and our betrayals and how we've treated one another. Well – maybe. But according to one Jewish saying the one question God will ask us is, 'did you enjoy my creation?' And maybe that gets to the heart of the life of resurrection, life with the risen Jesus, this physical Jesus, this embodied Jesus, this Jesus of the senses who greets us in Luke's gospel.

The taste of broiled fish, or a mid-morning cappuccino; the smell of warm bread fresh out of the oven; the glory of Spring flowers in the Keukenhof and the bulb fields; the embrace of a friend or the touch of a lover's warm skin; the sound of a skylark or a symphony; the defiant dignity of Rembrandt's late works; two dogs rampant on a bright early morning; ... you can add your own.  
The glory of God in a person fully alive. Amen.

Eternal God, holy God, loving God,  
praise, honour and glory be to you!  
God of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen,  
God of the empty tomb,  
God who triumphs over death,  
God of a whole new world that is coming,  
we worship you, we praise you,  
who in Jesus Christ returned from the grave to his disciples,  
sharing food with them, speaking words of life  
to their frightened hearts.  
You came to them, bemused and forlorn as they were,  
and you breathed new life into them

and shored up their faith.

We come to worship you,  
asking you to come to us as you came to them  
for we need that meeting with Jesus.

We need the reassurance that we are accepted and forgiven,  
for we are weak and sinful.

We need an injection of hope for we despair of  
our failures and our weakness.

So we come to you, confessing our sins in the confidence  
that our confession is always met  
by your forgiveness and grace.

Breathe upon us your forgiving love.

Speak to us words of grace,  
resurrect our faith that we may be transformed  
as your disciples were by your risen presence  
and so be changed into bold witnesses, as they were.

For we pray in Jesus' name and in his words  
we pray together, saying...

O gracious and loving God,  
we pray today for those who are deprived  
of a full measure of life...

We think of those for those in the grip  
of the power of death and who struggle for resurrection...

We pray for those who battle with depression,  
who feel that life has been sucked dry  
of colour and vitality.

O God fill their cup,

replenish their emptiness with hope...

We think of those suffering from dementia and Alzheimers,  
who wander in wilderness of memory loss.

May they be surrounded and supported by love  
and enabled to find joy in life...

We think of those in the valley of bereavement and loss,  
For those who are haunted by the absence of a familiar voice,  
or an empty chair, or a space in the bed...

O God of resurrection and new life  
bring healing and new life to all who walk  
in the valley of the shadow of death...

And we pray today for doctors and nurses,  
for hospitals and hospices and for all who  
strive to mend torn lives and to bring wholeness  
for those who treat body and mind and soul.

And we praise you for all the joys of life,  
for the blessings of the senses and the gift  
of being able to enjoy the world you have created.

Protect us from our self-destructiveness and  
teach us to live such that your creation may be enjoyed  
To the full and your glory revealed.

We pray all these things in the name of Jesus, the risen one,  
in whom death has met its match and its victor and its Lord. Amen.