

It was a dark and stormy night. The man gazed out at the trees bending low in the wind; a branch crashed down, scraping an upstairs window as it did so. Quickly he drew the curtains and turned back to the fireplace, glad of the fire's warm, rich glow. But as he stood there, the flames stopped dancing. They flickered and died. He shivered. A great coldness had entered the room. A door swung open. Footsteps crossed the floor towards him. But there was no one there!

That's how a ghost story might begin. Ghosts are scary. Just as many Jews believed in the existence of ghosts, so do some people nowadays. Sometimes ghosts were invisible, as in the scene I've just told you. Sometimes they looked like a real person.

The disciples thought they were seeing a ghost.

The eleven disciples and others of Jesus's friends are together in a room. They've talking about whether Jesus might possibly not be dead after all and then – suddenly – Jesus appears there among them. They are petrified. The 'ghost' speaks. It says, 'Peace be with you.' That makes no difference, they're scared stiff.

Think yourself in the place of any one of those disciples. Pretend, for instance, that you're James, a strong intelligent man, that's your reputation. But you ran away. In the Garden of Gethsemane when they came for Jesus, you ran away. And you weren't the only one. All of you left him. Peter and one other, probably John, did turn back later and follow to see where Jesus was taken, and Peter even followed into the courtyard of the High Priest's house. But then when people recognised him, his courage failed and he swore he didn't know Jesus, he had nothing to do with him. Peter could barely raise his head for shame. James, too, all of us, pretend disciples, are ashamed. Were you there when they crucified our Lord? Did you not run away? Did you not desert the man you loved, this remarkable man whose like you will never see again? But you're more than ashamed. Are the authorities going to come for you next? They have your name, oh, they know who you are all right. Will your neighbours speak to you now, loser? Will you be flogged for being with Jesus? Might you be crucified? Only one of the men among you – John – is recorded as daring to watch at the crucifixion from close by.

Or imagine that you're one of Jesus' women followers. Mary, wife of Clopas, for instance. At least you were brave enough to be

seen, with Jesus' mother, watching your Christ's crucifixion. What about you? They might not crucify you but they could take your husband away, confiscate your home, cast you out on the street with your children. What then?

Jesus's friends and followers are ashamed, and they're guilty, and they're scared, and they're keeping well out of the way of the authorities. Their only comfort is in each other's company, but how long will that comfort last? What on earth are they meant to do now that Jesus has gone? What was the point of all that stuff he said to them, what good is it now that he's gone? What are they meant to do? Will their friendships even survive now that the focus has gone?

And Jesus comes to them. They are so scared they know they could be imagining him. A ghost. But this is no ghost. Touch me and see, he says. Still they doubt. All right, so maybe ghosts have flesh on them – they've only heard stories, none of them has actually seen one. Could it possibly be Jesus? He asks for food. Nervously they pass him a bit of fish. And that's what does it. Jesus takes the fish – and he eats it.

They all knew how Jesus liked his food. Ghosts don't eat! Jesus ate, he swallowed. He was real. He was their Jesus. He explains again to them what he'd told them before his crucifixion, that he had had to die and that he would rise from the dead on the third day. This time they listen, this time they would understand. Most wonderfully of all, Jesus reminds them of repentance and forgiveness. Their repentance, the forgiveness to them for their weakness. And now it is for them to proclaim these great mercies to all people.

Those disciples were ordinary people, like you and me, with all our faults and weaknesses. And the shattering fact is that these ordinary, frightened, guilty, disillusioned people were transformed. They thought that with the death of Jesus, their glorious experience of being with him was over. They had known him, loved him, and lost him. Can you imagine?

Yet something colossal and irreversible happened to the sad group of disciples and friends. So colossal and irreversible that their experience and encounter after Jesus died on the cross was the ground from which the Christian church, our church, eventually sprang to life. Those friends and disciples weren't

known for their efficiency or their courage – but something changed in them. Jesus came to them. He was not just a dead memory. He was a living presence. He is a living presence. And this is the amazing reality at the core of our faith.

If we find it difficult to believe in the resurrection, try not believing in it. How can we explain the change in these ordinary people? Why should they choose to go out and preach and teach, choose to face ridicule, choose to leave their homes, to suffer, and die, as many did, for a lie? Why give up everything for a cause which they doubted? Certainly not for wealth and status. They didn't believe at first. They thought the women who talked of visitation were being fanciful. Yet these men and these women were the ones who went on to spread the good news.

Some of us may have had a dramatic meeting with Jesus. Michel, for instance, whose family was involved in distributing underground literature in the harsh early days of the Ayatollahs' rule in Iran. He managed to escape the country and sure death. In Pakistan he felt drawn to a church and he went in. Jesus came to him, Jesus stood beside him. That's how Michel tells it, quite matter-of-factly. He became a Christian. For others of us, it can be the faith that we were born into, that takes root and grows. For another group of us, it can be a gradual recognition of Jesus behind the eyes of others and from the lips of others, and perhaps over food, as with the disciples when Jesus is recognised in the sharing of food. Jesus ate with the rich and with the poor, and he does still. He eats with the sad and the glad, with friends and enemies, he eats with insiders and outsiders. He eats with us.

What does the Resurrection mean? Comfort, for one. Love is stronger than death. The risen Christ Jesus shows those gathered in that room and shows us that God's love for us, our love for one another, and our love for those who live before and after us does not pass. It is an eternal reality which rises above time and place.

It also means forgiveness, forgiveness for our fears and doubts. Jesus' resurrection seems too good to be true – that's what the disciples must have felt there in that room. It seems too good to be true that Jesus rose from the dead and conquered death. It seems too good to be true that nothing can separate us from the love of God, that despite the pain, suffering and tragedies of this world, in the long perspective all things work together for good.

Finding the Resurrection difficult to believe is all right. If the disciples could doubt, so can we. If St Augustine could doubt (he famously prayed, 'Lord, I believe; help my unbelief'), so can we. And in our doubting as well as in our conviction, Almighty God, revealed through Jesus, means challenge. Just as Jesus' life of faith showed the world the true nature of God, so too in our lives can we try to show God to the world around each of us. Our lives are not perfect like Jesus', and nor will they be, but he will be with us as we follow him, he will be with us as we grow and strengthen in the knowledge and faith and love of God and pass that on to others.

Just as Isaiah heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'whom shall I send? And who will go?' Let us echo his answer: 'Here am I. Send me.'

To God who made this and all things possible, be all honour and glory.

Amen