

Fourth Sunday of Easter 2016 Evening

Luke 24: 36 – 49

This evening's Gospel reading from St. Luke raises issues about both the nature of the resurrection we believe in and what we do about it.

There's a real emphasis in this particular resurrection appearance in Luke – and there have been others, but the concern of this one is to make this particular emphasis – that Jesus was physically resurrected from the dead. The disciples doubt and think they may be seeing a ghost. Perhaps the other resurrection appearances, to the women at the tomb, to the disciples in the Emmaus road, could be explained away on this basis. But what is stressed in this account is that the resurrected Jesus comes with a body to be examined and eats fish. There's not just been a metaphorical resurrection: this is the real deal, a bodily, physical resurrection.

The debate about whether Christians need to believe in a physical resurrection, or whether they even should do, is massive. It's not going to be disposed of in a ten minute sermon. But it is a debate that all thinking Christians should engage with. And what we can note this evening is that one thing that needs to be factored into that debate is that it is a physical, bodily resurrection that the Gospels bear witness to.

Furthermore what the Gospels bear witness to is the physical resurrection of the bodily resurrection of the crucified Christ – not of the pre-crucifixion Christ, but the crucified Christ, wounds and all. The text of this passage in Luke has a parallel in John with Jesus not only showing his hands and feet but expressly pointing out that they were wounded.

I often say from this pulpit – because it's one of my hobby-horses – that Christians often get stuck on Good Friday; that to say Jesus died for our sins is an insufficient description of our salvation; that we

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mustn't leave Jesus dead for our sins; and that Good Friday is only one half of the story with the resurrection being the other, necessary half without which the whole is incomplete. Well, this evening the converse needs to be stressed: resurrection without crucifixion doesn't get us anywhere either.

The resurrection does not undo death. It does not wind back the clock four or five days to make it as if the crucifixion had never happened. Jesus does not pop up and say "Ha, ha! You all thought I was dead, but – abracadabra – I'm alive after all!" No. Jesus was dead. And he has the wounds to prove it. The risen Christ we preach is the risen crucified Christ. Resurrection is intimately and inextricably associated with suffering.

And that means that salvation is not an escape from suffering. It is an engagement with it. Resurrection engages with suffering. Resurrection creates the resources with which both to endure suffering and also

to transform suffering through hope into a new form of life.

And what we do about that is preach it to everyone – to all nations – that Jesus suffered and died and rose again and through that offers a release from all the things that enslave us. That is the unconditional offer for everybody: nobody is excluded; nobody is marginalised; nobody is left vulnerable; nobody is dismissed because they're too different to cope with.

Except that's not what we preach. Because it's not in human nature to be so inclusive. It's counter-intuitive to accept diversity and to embrace difference. So when Jesus told these first apostles, who were gathered together, that they were to preach to all nations it caused civil war among the early Christians getting their heads round it. Witness the agonizingly earnest rhetoric of St. Paul labouring his point of view home. Witness the crisis summit in Jerusalem convened to

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determine whether Christianity was to be a sub-set of Judaism or an independent, universal faith.

And think of the civil wars we have witnessed in the church in our life-times about whether divorced people should be allowed to marry in church; about whether women should be deacons; about whether women should be priests; about whether women should be bishops; about whether gay people should be ordained; about whether gay people should be allowed to marry in church . . . let's face it: division and divisiveness is what we excel in, not carrying out the commission we read about this evening to preach his name to all nations.

But this sermon is not an exercise in finger-wagging from six feet above contradiction. I am not issuing an excoriating rebuke to anybody for being culpably resistant to the lesson that's to be learnt from this reading. The first sentence of this sermon was "This evening's Gospel reading from St.Luke raises issues

about both the nature of the resurrection we believe in and what we do about it." But "what we do about it" is not anything to do with learning lessons. Jesus knew that his disciples were incapable in their own strength of taking on board the radical suggestion of preaching to all nations. They weren't equipped for it. They needed to wait for the Holy Spirit.

I'm not presuming to criticise anybody; or to try to persuade anybody, by the power of persuasion alone, to do anything any differently. All I'm doing is suggesting that "what we do about it" is accept that we have a natural tendency to be suspicious and protective and divisive; and acknowledge that we are dependent on the grace of God's Holy Spirit to be released from that and to be transformed into the people God is calling us to be. For his sake; and for the sake of the world for which he died and rose again.

Amen.

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