

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**

**WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

**Sermon – 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Easter – 14<sup>th</sup> April 2024**

**All Saints' Marseille**

*The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain*

There are three resurrection appearances in St Luke's Gospel. The first is on Easter morning, when the women who have come with Jesus from Galilee arrive at the tomb and find it empty. They see a vision of two men in dazzling clothes who tell them Jesus is risen. They go to tell the other disciples, who do not believe them. Peter goes to look at the empty tomb, then goes home.

The second appearance is on the road to Emmaus, when two disciples are walking away from Jerusalem talking about all that has happened. A stranger draws near to accompany them on the road. They tell him the story, right up to the events of that morning. The stranger reminds them that the prophets had foretold that the Messiah should suffer before entering into his glory. 'Then beginning with Moses and the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.' Their hearts burn within them, they invite the stranger to stay with them and share supper, at which point he takes bread, blesses it, breaks it and gives it to them. Their eyes are opened and they recognize him in the breaking of the bread. The two disciples immediately return to Jerusalem, where the others are assembled. It is then that our Gospel reading begins – the third resurrection appearance.

At this stage, the disciples are still bewildered at the unfolding of the events. There's a lovely phrase in our reading – 'whilst in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering'. For those who struggle with the whole notion of resurrection, they are comforting words. Luke gives us permission to find it difficult, at the same time as emphasizing the power of it. In our reading he places emphasis on the solidity of Jesus's resurrected body – 'Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see...' He asks them for something to eat and they give him a piece of broiled fish, which he eats in their presence.

You could preach a whole sermon about that fish. For no words in the resurrection stories are there by accident. A fish was the symbol of Christ in the early church. The Greek word for fish was *ichthys*, its letters spelling the words 'Jesus Christ the Son of God our Saviour'. It's a symbol that has stuck - you see it today on bumper stickers.

There's another level of meaning, which occurs three times in the Bible. The miracle of the feeding of the five thousand involved Jesus taking five loaves of bread and two fish. In Luke's resurrection accounts, the risen Christ becomes known first in the breaking of bread on the Emmaus Road, and later that evening in Jerusalem in the eating of the fish. Bread and fish are also the menu of the breakfast given by Jesus to the astonished apostles on the lake shore in John's Gospel. The feeding of the five thousand, seen in this light, becomes a foretaste of resurrection, the heavenly banquet.

The resurrection appearances in Luke also tell us that the risen Christ is to be found in word and sacrament – in the scriptures and the breaking of the bread. It's how we meet him still.

I heard a conversation with a theologian this week, who suggested that today's Gospel reading, whilst an excellent summary of resurrection teaching, is somehow lacking in drama. I suspect what's missing is any dialogue from the disciples with which we might identify. There is dialogue in the story of the road to Emmaus (captured vividly in Caravaggio's painting *Supper at Emmaus* in the National Gallery in London). There is dialogue in Mary Magdalene's recognition in the garden when Jesus calls her by name. And there is dialogue in Thomas's protest that he will not believe until he can see, followed by his affirmation 'My Lord and my God!'. The theologian pointed out that the question the Easter narratives ask, both of the disciples and of us – and of those who do not come to church or trouble themselves with the Christian story – is: 'so what?' What difference does Easter make?

For Luke, the answer lies in the Acts of the Apostles (of which he was also the author), telling the story of the first followers of Christ in establishing the Church. But the 'so what?' question is one we all do well to reflect on during these weeks.

If I had to provide an answer to the question in three minutes, I think it would be something like this. I believe that it is granted us to see, in the mystery of the creation and the mystery that is other people and ourselves, glimpses of the unimaginable power of the Creator of all. If we move beyond the mystery of when, where and how the resurrection happened, if we reflect instead on what St Paul referred to as 'the power of [Christ's] risen life', we become aware that there is no limit to God's power to create and to redeem, to recreate and to affirm. For love involves affirming the one who is loved. God is love, and loves us beyond our imagining. Not even death can defeat God's purposes. As one writer has put it, 'He does not offer the miraculous gift of life only to snatch it

back again. ... He doesn't reveal himself in Jesus to prove what we already know – that life is unjust and death is cruel and sometimes violent. He comes to affirm that what he creates will not in the end be destroyed.'<sup>1</sup>

To be a Christian is to trust that God is able to recreate, to raise up, humanity in a new way that is unimaginable to us for now; that in Christ we are called into a relationship with God that not only goes to the depths of our being but also extends beyond our death. The reality of the Easter experience now is the same as it has always been. In Christ crucified and risen, God invites us to rethink who we are and what our destiny will be. We stand with one foot in time and one foot in eternity, as we live in God and God lives in us, setting us free from the prisons of our own making and raising us up to new life, to live as part of the new creation inaugurated on the first Easter Day. That is what we celebrate, today and every day. It does make a difference.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Mayne, *To Trust and to Love* (2010).