

## **Third Sunday of Easter**

**Acts 3: 12-19; 1 John 3: 1-7; Luke 24: 36-48**

### **A 'Witnessing' Community**

#### **Post Easter Day**

A question that I have been asked quite a few times this week is "Did you have a nice Easter" to which, on a few occasions at least I replied, "yes, and I still am having a nice Easter". Now I wasn't just talking about continuing to enjoy eating the Easter eggs that were kindly gifted to me. The point I was trying to make, perhaps rather pedantically, is that Easter Sunday is actually the beginning, rather than the end of Easter.

It is an easy thing to fall prey to: Ash Wednesday kicks off forty days of disciplined Lent; followed by an intense, and strikingly moving, Holy Week; and then comes the great celebration of Easter day, where the resurrection of Jesus is joyfully proclaimed. And it all then seems to be over. For those who come to church on the Sunday following Easter day, known infamously as 'Low Sunday', a trace of resurrection remains with the story of Thomas and the first witnesses to the resurrected Christ.

Today a similar story is told, perhaps Luke's version of the events John's Gospel described last week. This morning then, it is still Easter day night. If you follow me.

As I said, Easter day is only just the beginning; the Church's season of Easter lasts all the way into the middle of May. But the wonder, impact, and response to the resurrection of Jesus, is something that should last far beyond.

#### **Post Resurrection**

The fact that we are gathering today as a Church community, and even that we have a Church building to gather in, is because those

first witnesses to the resurrection, didn't lose sight of its wonder, and were profoundly affected by its impact, eventually responding in the way they were inspired to.

Those first witnesses were described by Luke as “startled”, “terrified” and “disbelieving” not the most flattering of words, but I dare say a very real description of how those disciples must have felt after all they had been through. I think it's fair to go as far to say that they were living with trauma - too much happening, all of it deeply shocking, and all at the same time. No wonder they were struggling.

Jesus' response is one of great pastoral concern, his first words not being a rebuke for abandoning him, but a good-will gesture of blessing them with peace. Luke's explicit reference to Jesus eating the piece of fish, not just proof of bodily resurrection, for the theologians to debate, but as an act of normality and friendship, for those who just needed the first century equivalent of a cup of tea and a biscuit.

## **New Communities**

But these first disciples, these first witnesses, did respond in a profound and Spirit-inspired way. They did what Jesus aimed to do throughout his ministry: to create new communities of followers - people who lived the rest of their lives based on their experience of being with Jesus, and then passing onto others what they had learned from that experience.

The book of Acts is a story of how all these new communities started. It is the classic ‘what happened next’ following on from the events of Easter day recorded in the Gospels. From that upper room in Jerusalem, the witnesses and followers of Jesus, went far and wide, telling others about him, doing what he told them to do, which resulted in more communities cropping up, all over the world, including here of course.

The reading today from Acts tells us something of how the apostles had eventually begun to respond to the risen Christ. Inspired by the Spirit and with courage, faith and boldness, the apostles had begun to preach and heal - they were doing the things Jesus had told them, and equipped them, to do.

But today's reading also shows that they had taken on another of Jesus' commands, that of forgiveness and reconciliation. Following the healing of a "lame beggar", Peter makes this speech which leads to his arrest. And although he is using some harsh language, and in truth language which has been used in an appalling way over the centuries in anti-Semitism, Peter is also showing the Christlike way, through a message of reconciliation and hope for the future.

He explains that the crowd's actions in condemning Jesus were due to ignorance, and on account of them, God's purposes have been fulfilled, evil has been wiped out, and times of refreshment are at hand.

This new community was therefore to be Christlike in its bold proclamation, pastoral care, and message of reconciliation and forgiveness. So let us in Shirley be a Church community which proclaims and cares, and seeks reconciliation and forgiveness.

### **Community of hope**

The epistles of John were written for the benefit of several house Church communities which had been going through recent crisis of persecution and break up. The same John who authored the Gospel is now encouraging these communities that despite everything, God is still with them and reminding them to stay true to what they believe.

He wants them to carry on doing the things Jesus taught them to do, because they were suffering in similar ways to how Jesus had suffered: notably persecution and opposition. But it was

incumbent on them to hold on faithfully, trust God and pass on Jesus' teachings to the next generation of followers in that area.

Ultimately John's letters are a message of hope. He doesn't want his community to lose the hope that keeps them going. John defines hope as being that one day all who keep their faith in Jesus, will see him; they will become 'pure', which is John-speak for living in perfect peace. And who doesn't want peace, both within us and in the world which we live.

The fact that this letter survives and has come down to us means that John's communities responded well to his encouragement and have passed their hope down to us. So let us in Shirley be a Church community of hope.

### **Our Church Community**

The last day of Easter season is Pentecost Sunday. The book of Acts, is twenty eight chapters long, and if you have never done so, or if it were a long time ago, can I strongly recommend to you, reading it. If you start it tomorrow, and read one chapter a day, taking Sundays off, you will have finished it, just before Pentecost Sunday. Acts could be your companion through this Easter season, and tell you how those first Christian communities began.

Something which I love about Acts is the amount of people involved in these Christian communities. Look out for the names of those who helped in establishing these Church communities enabling Christianity, and its message of peace, reconciliation and hope, to spread. Many are mentioned only once, , not even named, but they all played their part, it wasn't just left up to the leaders. Just as we, in Shirley, must all play our part, we are all called to respond as witnesses to the resurrection.

So then, can we in this Church community in Shirley, feel emboldened, inspired and encouraged to do what Jesus is telling us to do in Shirley today: to proclaim his name, to care for one

another, and to shine as a community of reconciliation, forgiveness and hope. This is our call this Easter time and beyond: this is a way we can be witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus. Amen.

Rev'd Richard Haynes – Third Sunday of Easter 2024