

Sermon 21/07/24 Resurrection

‘On the third day he rose again in accordance with the scriptures’.

We have a familiarity with resurrection. Disney aficionados will think of the scene towards the end of Frozen where Anna’s heart is becoming cold but she is rejuvenated by the love of her sister. Most of us will be able to tell of family or friends whose hearts have stopped beating but have been brought back to life due to quick thinking onlookers and medical science.

But neither of those contexts would have any meaning for the disciples, the Gospel writers, or the men who were at Nicea and compiling our creed. The traditional Jewish view of resurrection was of some catastrophic, world-wide event where innumerable ancestors would be brought back to life.

And none of that has even a close resemblance to what we are celebrating on Easter morning – the return of Jesus to life three days after he had been crucified and buried.

There are two obvious questions to be asking: was he really dead?, was he really alive again?

When John, in his gospel, describes the raising of Lazarus the narrative makes it clear that he has been dead for four days, there will be a stench in the tomb, the tomb is opened and Lazarus walks out. The soldiers at the crucifixion found Jesus dead while still on the cross, and they pierced his side with a lance, he was then in the tomb for three days. Little question that he did indeed die.

Then there are the post resurrection appearances to a variety of people and in a variety of circumstances. To the women in the garden early in the morning who believed him to be alive, why else would they convey a message to the disciples. That wonderful encounter on the road to Emmaus, where he was recognised by his actions in blessing the food. To the disciples in the locked room, and again later when Thomas was with them. Thomas who was doubtful and looked for proof, but became convinced. And the seashore breakfast in Galilee after a second miraculous catch of fish. The language of the gospels may hint at walking through locked doors and suddenly disappearing, but the disciples at this time were shocked and fearful, they were probably not at their most observant. And Jesus did eat with them. He was alive.

Within John’s gospel Jesus tells his disciples that he has the power to lay down his life and to take it up again. Paul at the start of his letter to the Romans is clear that the resurrection is evidence that Jesus as the Son of God. He tells them later in the same letter, Jesus was raised from the dead so that we too can live in newness of life. It is worth remembering that these letters were written 50-60 years after the death. There were people alive who had been alive at the time.

So we believe that Jesus was dead and came back to life after three days. Not due to medical science, not due to some sort of universal catastrophe. This was not what the Jews at the time or we now would recognise. One man, the Son of God, was resurrected. Why does it matter?

Jesus overcame his death. Despite his killing, the evidence of the soldiers that he had died, his bodily fluids draining away, he came back to life and returned to his friends. It does appear that the relationship had altered but that was on their part. Suddenly all the things he had predicted made sense whereas before it had been easy to ignore references to dying and raising up as things they did not understand.

The resurrection is the next stage in the story of God's kingdom. A story that began 'in the beginning' with the making of heaven and earth, that takes us through the events and prophecies of the Old Testament. A story of a God despairing of the actions of people who sent his Son to show how much he loved them, how much he loved us. And then allowed his Son to be killed in a hideous way to show us forgiveness. In the resurrection he shows us that even after death, life is possible.

Of course the story continues through the New Testament, through the subsequent centuries until we ourselves become a very small part of it.

It is easy for us to get tied up in the detail of Jesus life but consider for a moment the content of the New Testament outside of the gospels. There is so little reference to his life but a great emphasis on 'the risen Christ who died for us'. The early church focused on that reality, the resurrection gives us a hope for an existence beyond the grave. Just as Jesus showed the people that Lazarus could be alive again after his burial so God showed the disciples that Jesus was alive. The New testament writers have shared this with us.

Through the death and resurrection of Jesus God demonstrated his willingness to forgive humankind and to give us all a hope for a future existence for all time. We don't know what that existence will be like, how people from all the ages will blend together in this new heaven. But in faith we can know that this will be. There is a future for us all. As Jesus promised – because I live you also will live.

Amen