

## **Third Sunday of Easter**

**Collect:** Almighty Father, who in your great mercy gladdened the disciples with the sight of the risen Lord: give us such knowledge of his presence with us, that we may be strengthened and sustained by his risen life and serve you continually in righteousness and truth; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

**Acts 3.12–19:** When Peter saw it, he addressed the people, ‘You Israelites, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we had made him walk? <sup>13</sup> The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our ancestors has glorified his servant Jesus, whom you handed over and rejected in the presence of Pilate, though he had decided to release him. <sup>14</sup> But you rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given to you, <sup>15</sup> and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses. <sup>16</sup> And by faith in his name, his name itself has made this man strong, whom you see and know; and the faith that is through Jesus has given him this perfect health in the presence of all of you. <sup>17</sup> ‘And now, friends, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. <sup>18</sup> In this way God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, that his Messiah would suffer. <sup>19</sup> Repent therefore and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out.”

**Gospel: Luke 24.36b–48:** While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, ‘Peace be with you.’ <sup>37</sup> They were startled and terrified and thought that they were seeing a ghost. <sup>38</sup> He said to them, ‘Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? <sup>39</sup> Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.’ <sup>40</sup> And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet.

<sup>41</sup> While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, ‘Have you anything here to eat?’ <sup>42</sup> They gave him a piece of broiled fish, <sup>43</sup> and he took it and ate in their presence. <sup>44</sup> Then he said to them, ‘These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.’ <sup>45</sup> Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, <sup>46</sup> and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, <sup>47</sup> and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. <sup>48</sup> You are witnesses of these things.”

### **Sermon:**

Today’s reading reminds me of when I was young and my family were being shown around a very old and gloomy stately home. And in one particularly gloomy room my sister turned to the guide and said, “Tell me, are there any ghosts here?” The guide assured her, “Young lady, in all the years I’ve worked here I’ve never seen a single ghost!” “And how long have you worked here,” she asked him. “Four hundred years,” he replied.

Last week we heard John’s account of how Jesus, on the evening of the day of the resurrection, appeared to the disciples in the upper room and said to them, “Peace be with you.” Today we hear from Luke of that same appearance in the upper room – it’s the evening of the day of the resurrection and, like John, Luke describes how Jesus appears to the disciples and says to them, “Peace be with you.” It’s not that surprising that one of the first thoughts to spring to mind was that Jesus was a ghost. But Jesus was at pains to point out that his appearance was not a ghostly one.

He invited the disciples to touch him. You can't touch a ghost, your hand would go straight through since a ghost has no substance. This wasn't the case with Jesus. He was flesh and blood and he did have substance. Perhaps that was why Thomas, as we heard last week, said, "Unless I touch him for myself I shan't believe." The disciples, understandably, were still terrified. So Jesus, ever practical, gave them something mundane and homely to do. He sent them off to cook a piece of fish both to settle them down and to prove that he was real, for ghosts have no need of food.

And when they'd all eaten together and the disciples were feeling a little more sure of themselves and of Jesus, he immediately began to teach them. He opened the Scriptures to them in a new sort of way, just as he had opened the Scriptures to two disciples on the way to Emmaus – an incident Luke describes just before today's reading.

It all sounds very normal and just the sort of thing that Jesus did during his previous ministry, but there are a number of hints that it was actually far from normal. He may not have been a ghost, but somehow or other he appeared in the room. He doesn't seem to have used the door – one minute he wasn't there, and the next minute he was, standing amongst them.

And Jesus was fit and well. On the Friday his injuries had been so horrific that he'd died from them. Now on the Sunday, only two days later, although he seems to have had scars from the wounds – why else would he have said to them "see my hands and my feet" – clearly there was no bleeding, no discomfort and no pain. Jesus was upright and walking normally and naturally and was as fit and healthy as anyone in the room. Indeed, he'd just walked seven miles to Emmaus and presumably back again – not a journey to be undertaken by the unfit.

And there seems to have been something different about the way in which he taught the disciples. Previously, although he spoke a great deal in parables and stories, much of his teaching was quite obscure and had to be explained to the disciples afterwards. We're told again and again in the gospels that their minds were dull or that they were blind or that they couldn't understand.

That wasn't so for the disciples in today's account, neither was it so for the disciples on the road to Emmaus which immediately precedes this account in Luke's gospel. In both episodes, the disciples immediately grasped what he was telling them and they were filled with fervour and excitement and enthusiasm. It was as though now they understood with the heart rather than simply with the mind or the intellect. Now he is risen, Jesus teaches them in a new way and their minds and hearts are opened to the Scriptures.

So the Jesus who appeared in the upper room on Easter Sunday evening was not the same as the Jesus who died on Good Friday afternoon. Or rather, he was the same person, yet he was quite different. It was certainly Jesus who died, Jesus the son of Mary and Joseph, and who somehow or other passed through death and was seen alive on the other side of death. But this post-death, post-Easter Jesus was different. He was Jesus the Christ, the Saviour, the Messiah. He was risen!

The resurrection of Jesus is a huge stumbling block for many people, including many Christians. There have always been Christians who have suggested that Jesus didn't physically rise from the dead, that it was some kind of spiritual experience that the disciples had of Jesus on that first Easter Day. Personally I do not see how you can explain the existence of the early Church, the fearless preaching of disciples who had previously been fearful, unless they were convinced that there was an empty tomb and a real, physical risen Jesus.

At 2,000 years after we shall never know exactly what or how it happened – the mechanics, if you like, of the resurrection. All we can do is examine the different accounts of the evidence and reach the most likely conclusion. But we can be absolutely certain that something happened, and that it was something momentous, something previously utterly unknown. The tomb was definitely empty. The disciples were convinced that Jesus had conquered death and was once again with them in the flesh.

And the resurrection of Jesus changed everything. The disciples, who for the previous three years had a kind of belief in Jesus and kind of understood what he was about though they struggled with it all, now knew. They understood in a completely different way at a completely different level. They knew in the centre of their being that Jesus was their risen Lord.

And it's exactly the same today. When they meet with the risen Christ, those who have spent the whole of their lives kind of believing and kind of understanding, suddenly know at a totally different level and in a totally different way that Jesus is Lord. And like the disciples, that new kind of knowing in the centre of being changes everything. So it's impossible to know the risen Christ at the centre of being until you meet him for yourself. No amount of reading the Bible or doing good deeds or even attending church and saying prayers will give an experience of the risen Christ unless and until you meet him for yourself.

In meeting and knowing Jesus, there's a very real source of strength and power. And life becomes eternal life. Because life is no longer finite, ended by death. Death is no longer to be feared, because you know that, one day you are going to Glory.

And that's what's on offer to us 'Easter people', to those who meet with the resurrected Lord. And compared with that, the actual mechanics of resurrection suddenly become much less important, for you find out for yourself that the risen Christ is no ghost but a living Saviour who lives in your heart today and who is with you for ever.