

Sunday 23 April 2023
Holy Trinity (08.00) & (11.00)
Holy Communion
Easter 3

Acts 2:14a,
1 Peter 1:17-23
Luke 24:13-35

In this post Easter season I've been thinking about what it must have been like for those disciples on what, for us, has become Easter Day - a day of celebration and rejoicing. But, for them, it must have initially felt like a time of defeat and utter disappointment.

I can imagine them wondering, whether it could really be true? All day they had been hearing reports that Jesus was alive—but they were afraid to let themselves believe it. After all, they had seen what had been done to Jesus just two days before: the trials, the beating, and then the brutal execution. They had watched from afar as others took his body down and gave it to Joseph for burial.

But then, that morning, when Mary and the other women went to anoint Jesus' body with spices, Jesus' body was gone! Instead, the women saw two men in dazzling garments who told them Jesus was no longer dead. He had risen. They came running back to tell the disciples, and the others who were hiding in the upper room.

At first, it seemed like an idle tale and the disciples didn't believe them, so Peter got up and ran to the tomb himself. Peter, too, saw the empty linen cloths and came back amazed.

And then, as we heard just now, later that day, two of the disciples were walking the seven mile journey Emmaus talking about all that happened. Suddenly, they were joined on the road by this other man, asking them about what they were discussing. They told him of Jesus' deeds and teachings, and then how Jesus had been handed over to the authorities and put to death. They also told him about the strange events of that morning.

Then, the man surprised them. Beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted the scriptures to them. When they arrived in the village, the man turned to carry on along the road, but the two disciples invited him to stay the evening with them. They sat down to eat and their guest took the bread, blessed it, and broke it and gave it to them.

Suddenly their eyes were opened and they realised that it was Jesus who was with them! Jesus disappeared and, although it was late, they got up and hurried back to Jerusalem to tell the other disciples what they had experienced.

"The Lord has risen indeed and has appeared to Simon!" the disciples cried.

Do you think those disciples realised just how fortunate they were? They'd heard Jesus teach, saw the miracles, saw him resurrected from the dead.

I sometimes wonder whether it was easier or harder to believe for those disciples back then than compared to us today?

Their faith was based on being real eye witnesses, seeing actual proof. But for us modern day believers, our belief and obedience calls for an even greater step of faith.

Last week, in our Gospel account written by John, we heard Jesus say to Thomas... "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." As I said last week, this wasn't simply a rebuke for Thomas but an encouragement for all of us who have followed afterwards. Jesus wasn't just talking to Thomas, he was talking to you and me.

The crucifixion of Christ and the first reports of his resurrection did not provoke hymns or an explosion of faith, any more than last Easter Sunday inspired our two congregations here to burst out into profound discipleship. The danger is that we are already back to trudging down the same old road. And yet there are glimmers of hope, even for all of us overly familiar with the story.

Those guys on the road to Emmaus recognised Jesus only after three things happened.

The first thing that happened was that they delved into the Scriptures together. Too often we want to know God without troubling ourselves with the Bible, but (as Luther once put it) the Bible is "the swaddling clothes in which Christ is laid." The Scriptures are God's divinely-ordained, merciful, gracious means by which we can know and experience God – and especially when we probe the Scriptures with other seekers. The Bible can be hard, even weird in places. It can take immense time and patience, and really has no quick answers. Perseverance and discipline though will bring great rewards.

And then the second thing is that Jesus was made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

Holy Communion is the highest moment of the Christian life, for Christ is mysteriously present each time we gather at the table and break this bread, symbolic of his act of salvation – as we do so together, we are one with him, one together because of him.

And, surprisingly, there was this third thing which involved them doing something generous for someone other than themselves. Don't forget that their simple effort at hospitality was the prelude to their awareness of Christ! He was going to journey on, but they urged him to stay with them, to share a meal.

Again, we often feel we do not know Christ because we never have the opportunity to meet up with the poor, we never reach out to those desperately in need of food and shelter. But when we do, not only do we help others, but we discover Christ, alive and blessing us.

How do we live as Christians and as churches in 21st-century Penn & Tylers Green?

We live in a time of post-Christendom where the Church, rather than being at the centre of society, finds itself at the edge and at times is overlooked. In times past people encountered the Church at various stages of their lives. Most young people grew up being taught bible stories. Now however, church attendance can be seen as nothing more than just one amongst many leisure pursuits for older folks and for many outside the Church they see it as notable only for being against things.

So, how do we 'do church' in such times?

Do we still expect people to find us and to respect what we stand for? Are we and our church set up to explain the good news of the Gospel in and for all our current generations? Can we put forward any evidence at all that our identity is not primarily about preserving buildings or sticking up for a certain type of worship style, but rather is grounded and rooted in our saviour Jesus Christ and his power to save?

My prayer for us all this morning is that we will receive that blessing promised by Jesus with great joy, and that, in response, we will worship God with all our hearts, and that we will be open to doing what God calls us to do.

So, know that you are blessed and know that that same Spirit that empowered those disciples at that first Easter, empowers you today.

And may you know that same peace as you journey on with Him.

Amen.