

Sunday 30 April 2006: The Third Sunday of Easter

Resurrecting the Annual Meeting

Readings: Acts 3.12-19; Luke 24.36b-48

One of the things I love about the accounts of the resurrection is that the four Gospels are so varied. Is it that they are just stories, make believe, wishing it were so but fantasy; or are they rich tapestries conveying an experience so surprising and difficult to pin down, witnessing to a new reality beyond all past experience? Our response is a matter of faith.

Mark tells of the women going to the tomb and of them finding it open and a young man telling them Jesus has gone ahead of them to Galilee. It was so inexplicably or embarrassingly short that a longer ending got added just to fill it out a bit.

Matthew is similar but includes the appearance of the risen Jesus to the women who had been to the tomb: “Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me”. The chief priests and elders conspired with the soldiers to suppress the story and Matthew’s Gospel ends with the eleven disciples meeting Jesus in Galilee on the mountain to which he had directed them and they received the great commission to ‘go out and make disciples of all nations ... And remember I am with you to the end of the age’.

John tells the story of Mary Magdalene finding the stone had been rolled away, of her running to tell Simon and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and of him out running Peter to the empty tomb. John tells of Mary and the gardener and the recognition in names – “Mary”, “Rabbouni”, “Do not touch me”. He tells of the gift of the Holy Spirit being breathed on the fearful disciples gathered behind locked doors on that first day; of Thomas being invited to see, touch and believe. “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe”. That’s us, who have gathered to see and touch the body of Christ in the Eucharist and even though there were many other signs done in the presence of the disciples, these are written that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God and through believing you may have life in his name.

Having crafted such a beautiful ending it is very odd that John then sets off to Galilee: “After these things Jesus showed himself again by the Sea of Tiberias ...” and we’re back where it all began, re-calling and renewing the disciples catching fish and sharing a meal and Peter being questioned three times and restored re-commissioned after his denial that he even knew the man. He is testimony to us that good can come out of evil and we can make a new beginning.

Luke, part of which we have just heard, is different again, confined to a single day in and around Jerusalem:

On the first day of the week at early dawn, the women found the empty tomb;
“Why do you look for the living among the dead? Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here he is risen...;”

On hearing this, Peter ran to the tomb and looking in he saw the linen cloths by themselves;
Two of them on the road to Emmaus travel with a stranger who, beginning with Moses and all the prophets, interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures;

And then the supper in which he is recognized in that familiar action of the blessing and breaking of bread.

So the two disciples rushed back to Jerusalem and found the eleven and their companions gathered together. Bereavement can be isolating. The disciples have gathered together – as if to draw strength and comfort from each other and to try to piece together the stories of this extraordinary day.

While they were talking Jesus stood among them and announces, “Peace be with you” as if to assure them. But they were startled and terrified. He said to them, “Why are you so frightened and why do doubts arise in your hearts?” (Lk 24.38)

As it happens they find themselves gathered around the body of Christ: “Touch me and see”.

Whilst bewilderment does give way to joy they were disbelieving and still wondering

Then they opened their minds to the scriptures how what has happened is in fulfillment of the law of Moses and the prophets and psalms must be fulfilled.

He will send them out but told them to wait in the city to be clothed with power from on high.

Then he led them out to Bethany, blessed them and withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. They returned to Jerusalem and were continually in the temple blessing God.

In every generation people will have read into these accounts through their own experiences of following Christ. It's predictable that I can see a post modern diversity already there in the Gospel accounts, but that's not really the point. Particularly in Luke that first Easter is not at all the picture of quiet reassurance or fulfilled expectation. If the events of Holy Week and Good Friday were disturbing and troublesome, the resurrection does not reassuringly make things better but disturbs and takes us into new territory not immediately understood. It takes persistence, faithfulness, a willingness to stay with each other, around Christ, before we even begin to 'get it'.

To some extent these accounts of the resurrection provide patterns of how it might be for us as a church. In the Gospel patterns we have seen that the followers of Christ are called to new ground which is not immediately understandable or as expected. In each generation the Spirit calls us into new truth and to fresh expressions of Christian faith. It is not that we are of one mind or have the same experiences but that we are gathered around Christ who is our unity. We have a strong commitment to each other because Christ has called us to belong with each other.

Today is our Annual meeting when we give a formal account to each other and to God for what we have done as a church in the last year. It matters not a bit that we are not all in agreement about this or that. In the things we have done, to some extent we will have succeeded and to some extent we will have failed. We come as we are. That is exactly how it was for the first disciples. All that matters is that we gather in the presence of Christ, in his service and to God's glory. So we gather again, and make a new beginning not in our own strength but in our willingness to try once more to be 'in Christ'.