

Sermon 15th April 2018

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Acts 3.12-19, Luke 24.36b-48

Text in red was omitted at 0800 Service to shorten the sermon

Two men were walking home after a party and decided to take a shortcut through the cemetery just for laughs. Right in the middle of the cemetery they were startled by a tap-tap-tapping noise coming from the misty shadows. Trembling with fear, they found an old man with a hammer and chisel, chipping away at one of the headstones.

"My God," one of them said after catching his breath, "You scared us half to death ... we thought you were a ghost! What are you doing working here so late at night?"

"Those fools!" the old man grumbled. "They misspelled my name!"

Now then, do you believe in Ghosts? If you look at the bookshops or films out now, Ghosts, vampires and zombies seem to be the 'in thing'. There does seem to be an element of us wanting the tension and fear as part of our entertainment. Fear gets the adrenalin going. I remember when I was a about 13 or 14 being alone in the house and watching a program on TV called Tales of Mystery and Imagination. Well, it frightened me half to death and I spent the rest of the week being frightened about being alone in the house or it being really dark.... thing is I still watched the next episode the following week....

But entertainment is one thing and although we get into the storyline, underneath we know it is just that, a story, happening to someone else. Even though we jump or scream when something suddenly happens, we can still laugh at our reaction because we know it's only a story.

We can be quite sophisticated about what we allow to penetrate our defensive mechanism and actual touch our hearts and soul. So, with most ghost stories we are ultimately in control even if it might frighten the lives out of us for that short time. Ah well that's entertainment!

So, we don't believe in Ghosts, do we? So, when the disciples are confronted by the risen Christ, do you take it all in your stride. Is it just another story? After all we know what happens in the end. But what do you think they felt? Frankly, I don't think that our Gospel translations really do justice to the terror, dread, trepidation but above all the profound fear that they must have felt. This is not the natural law. This can't happen in real life. But the gospels are not fiction and the authors can't use the licence that scriptwriters can employ. So, the story we heard today is simply the facts without those devices, tricks, and special effects, that these days we have come to expect and make it realistic.

Given some of the stuff our children see or read I seriously believe that the gospel writings may not be enough, and we need to work at bringing the stories to life for them. Similarly, in our own case there is a danger that the more times we read it, the greater the risk of losing focus on the message. Did anyone here jump when we heard that "Jesus himself stood among them?" (I may have heard a small scream)

but seriously if we are not careful we can read through these stories and take it all in our stride as we move on to the next bit.

Let me try and give you an example as we look at the gospel reading. This is after all the basic tenet of our faith, so it wouldn't hurt to re-visit it and think it through in terms that we can, or maybe can't understand. To fully understand or believe Jesus' resurrection, his coming back from the dead really requires huge amounts of faith. Personally, I would suggest that the account as written doesn't automatically inspire that sort of reaction. For something so profound, so demanding on our credibility, the words are too impersonal, too black and white. So just for the next few minutes, let's try and put ourselves in that room with the Disciples. Okay, we all know how we personally handle fear or shock, and maybe we think we could or couldn't handle the situation – only you will know. But we can get influenced by the crowd dynamic and most of the others in this upstairs room are already in various stages of shock or hysteria at the events that have happened to Jesus and let's be clear, in fear of their lives. They really believed that at any moment the door was going to be kicked down by the Temple Guards and the fate that befell Jesus would happen to them all. But if that's not enough, some of the women present and even Peter and John are trying to tell everybody that the tomb is empty. They don't know how, but someone has not only moved the stone but also taken the body. Some of the women say that they saw someone who told them that Jesus was alive, whilst another is saying that she actually spoke to Jesus although she didn't recognise him at first. Can you feel the desperation and anxiety in that room? Everyone is talking and there is an element of hysteria being generated as all and sundry try to get their heads around what is going on and more to the point what are they going to do. Underlying it all is raw fear. Fear that everything you hold dear, everything that you've pinned your hopes on and given everything up for is gone. Dead. Whilst trying to make sense of all this two men who are vaguely known to the group turn up, and now they are claiming not only to have seen Jesus, but also saying that they spent the day with him on the road and broke bread with him.

So that's the scenario. Totally out of control.

And then "Jesus himself stood among them and said to them 'Peace be with you'". Although I applaud the sentiment I don't think that line would work today. The gospel politely tells us they were "startled and terrified and thought they were seeing a ghost". I can think of some other more descriptive words that spring to mind. But you are in the room. What do you feel? Are you hallucinating? Are you dreaming? Have you finally given in to the hysteria and panic? Because we don't believe in Ghosts, so this can't be happening.

The gospel account then describes a series of tests that would have been recognisable to early readers, standard checks that people used to test whether if a ghost was real or not. This involved examination of the peripheral limbs, the hands and fingers, checking whether the feet touched the floor, and of course eating solid food. So, Jesus' offer to look at his limbs and give him food would to early readers simply have been clear and recognisable confirmation as to his human reality. Luke does admit a level of confusion describing how "in their joy they were disbelieving" and I think this is probably a fair assessment of how most people today would react to the situation.

But hold on. Our reading from Acts describes a very different Peter and John than the characters witnessed in the gospel reading. We are told that Peter and John were now out and openly walking about Jerusalem. What's happened to the fear? Whilst walking through the Temple they heal a crippled beggar by invoking the name of Jesus. When the crowds saw this they all rushed to crowd around Peter and John in awe and amazement. Surely, the Temple was the last place they would have wanted to be seen and yet Peter as he is wont to do in Acts steps up to center stage and seizes the opportunity to 'witness' to Jesus' glory and status as God. Peter doesn't hold back either as he tells the crowd that they were guilty of 'rejecting the Holy and Righteous One' and that they were all implicit in killing 'the Author of Life'.

Admittedly it got them locked up and a good beating, but this didn't deter them. Released on the condition that they stop preaching about Jesus, they immediately resumed where they left off.

So, what are we missing?

Most if not all of our knowledge about Jesus is derived from the New testament writings but New testament scripture was not written as it happened or even by the people who were directly involved. There is a gap of at least 20 years and possibly even 60 to 100 years after Jesus' death before the gospels were written. During this break the main vehicle for passing on the message would have been verbal retelling of the stories. It was the main method of communication given that at least 95% of the population would have been illiterate. In some parts of the East this aural tradition remains to this day as people gather at the end of the day to exchange news and retell well known standards. Specialist story tellers and raconteurs recite the same stories and the audiences know and request the retelling of familiar tales

But these Jesus stories would have slowly disappeared if not for one thing; Faith. I said earlier that the resurrection was the basic tenet of our faith which it undoubtedly is. But maybe we should look on it more as confirmation of our faith. Let me explain. The 'Easter Faith' as it is sometimes referred to, was not the disciple's faith. They didn't start to believe when Jesus appeared to them. They already had faith. They already believed what Jesus said and claimed to be. Remember Peter's reply to Jesus' question "who you say I am?" Peter replied, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God" (Matt 16.16) Jesus during his ministry made a faith-creating impact on the disciples such that they were prepared to leave their families, their jobs and lives behind to follow him. They lived with him for months because they believed in him. Their faith was nurtured by being with him. Okay, maybe it wobbled after his crucifixion, but they weren't ready for it and when they thought about it, he had told them he would return. The manner of his return was a shock – there's really no easy way of coming back from the dead but they were able to quickly recover because they already had the foundation of their faith. And of course, how much stronger their faith would become now that Jesus has risen as promised.

It has puzzled me in the past whatever happened to the 5000 that were fed on the 5 loaves and 2 fishes? What happened to the families and friends of the people Jesus cured or those that witnessed these events? What happened to those that were mourning when he brought back to life the little girl or Lazarus etc. etc.? These people did not go away and forget about what they witnessed. It wasn't like going to the pictures or theatre. This was real and lifechanging stuff. It impacted on their everyday lives and they told their stories, they believed in Jesus. Of course, the crowds in Jerusalem that shouted for

his death may have heard him preach but were not true followers – I 'm sure most of them didn't know what was going on. Most of Jesus' ministry was in the smaller towns and villages of Judea. This is where he taught and developed his disciples and followers.

I do like the gospels but think the way they are written, doesn't do justice to the obvious charisma that Jesus must have had. We don't get the impact and longer-term effect that he had on all who witnessed to him. We hear that the crowds flocked to hear him talk but not what happened afterwards. But I believe that witnessing Jesus would be a life changing experience. So, when the disciples started to proclaim his resurrection, is it any wonder that the number of Christ's followers rapidly increased. Many of them had already been party to or witnessed his miracles and teaching. And they already believed.

So, the bit that was missing was this foundation of faith that the disciples already had in Jesus. We don't have that luxury of personally witnessing Christ in the flesh, but we do have the advantage of knowing the whole story. We can't live through that experience in person, but we can look behind the words at the bigger picture and try and understand what they mean for us.

Do you remember the reaction caused by Mel Gibson's 2004 film, *The Passion of the Christ* with his graphic scenes of torture and crucifixion? Regardless of the uproar and protests the film brought lifechanging reality to many of those who watched it. It was condemned as being too realistic and brutal and as entertainment I'd agree but the point was to bring to life the shocking visual interpretation of Jesus' humiliation. For many people this opened their eyes to the pain and suffering that Jesus bore for us in a way that the biblical words cannot depict. And that can't be bad because their faith now has an added edge.

Contemporary society lives on information, feeding an insatiable desire for knowledge facts and detail. Christians have had 2000 years to analyse, challenge, contextualise events, and seek answers and explanations. We know more about the background to the gospel than ever before and yet there is the risk that we downgrade the significance of his earlier ministry as we get to the 'raison d'être' of his time on earth.

Everything that is written has a purpose. But the gospels hold so much that is not immediately obvious or in most cases clear. The gospels are not stories. If you like, they are coded training manuals. If you can get past the written word and look for the meaning you will get closer to the real Christ of our faith. We live in a time where it's good to challenge. So, it's simple. Ask the questions, re-read the text, get a commentary. If we can make the story more real for us, then our witness to Christ will be stronger. Faith or belief is much easier if you can identify with Christ. And then, like the disciples Easter is the glorious confirmation of our already established faith in Jesus.

Let's think about that when we proclaim our witness; Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.

Amen